HANAMONOGATARI

FLOWER TALE

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
DANIEL JOSEPH

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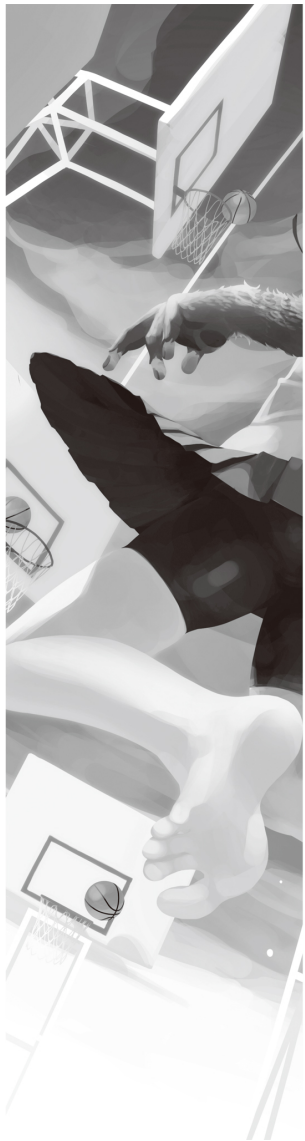

HANAMONOGATARI

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CHAPTER CHANGE

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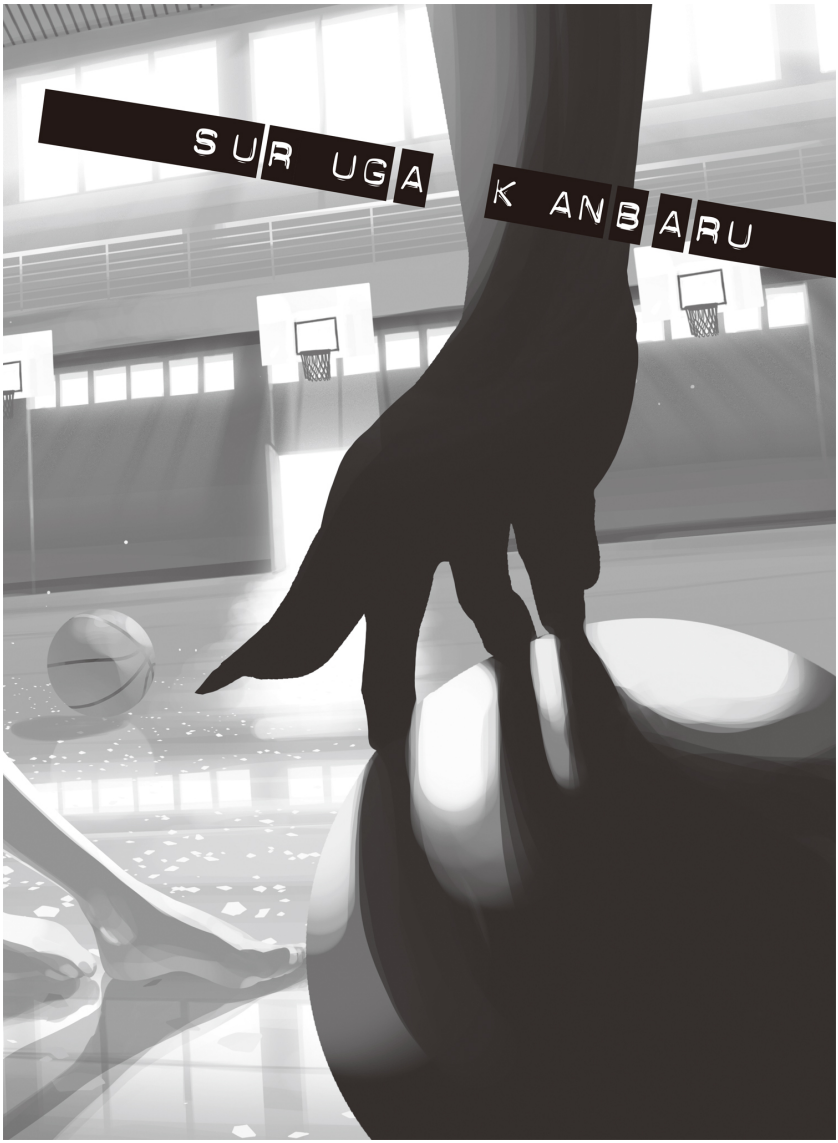
SUR UGA
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001

I want to tell you about how stupid Suruga Kanbaru is. Do you mind listening? The story is so inconsequential that I feel bad making anybody listen to it, so don't go out of your way or anything, but if it's really no bother, I would honestly be grateful.

Still, it's probably pointless.

Utterly pointless.

She would disagree, and simply talking about your feelings or having someone listen to your problems making you feel better is a notion that I don't buy either. Even if you think you feel better, you probably only think so.

It's the thinking so, that very illusion, that people desire deep down—I'll bet she'd say. Yet even though those words resonate with me on some profound level, there's something about it that I just can't accept.

No.

I'm sure I can't accept it just because she's the one saying it—I'm not weighing the view itself but deciding based on the kind of person she is.

Awful, right?

When it's not a matter of what was said but who said it, you might even call it discrimination—then again, if that's the kind of person I am, it'd be disingenuous of me to dismiss that way of thinking.

How wonderful it'd be to live without coming to dislike anyone, how blissful to live without hating.

I get that.

I get it, you don't have to tell me twice.

But it's easier said than done.

There are plenty of people I've disliked in my life thus far, plenty of people I've hated—in fact, does any such person exist? Someone who could stand up in front of the world and say "I've never disliked anyone in my life"?

At any rate, I—Suruga Kanbaru—know tons of people that I can't stand.

And.

I don't think much of myself, either.

I've seen enough of my dark side to die from it.

To kill for it.

…I'm not much good at thinking about things, or to put it plainly, I'm stupid, so I don't really know, but how does everybody else cope with all of that?

It can't be that most people living in this world love themselves and find themselves impeccable—everyone's got to have something they're dissatisfied with, something about themselves that they dislike, whether it's their personality or their life itself or whatever. Everyone's got to descend into self-loathing sometimes.

Make that all the time.

And yet they have to wake up every morning and keep at it, right?

Coming to terms with it, finding the sense in it—if possible, I'd love someone to teach me how.

I couldn't do it.

I couldn't, so I turned to a devil for help.

I cut loose my dark side as though it were separate from me—but

what I did there, actually, was to remake myself into a devil.

Finding the devil in me, I went and nurtured it—that's all. But precisely because that's all it was, I think everyone does the same thing to some extent.

Not that it mitigates my sins by any means—nor do I have the slightest intention of running away from them.

But I can't help wondering.

How does everybody else do it?

…It's because I want to know that I'm telling a story about how stupid I am. After all, it's only polite to go first if you want someone to share something with you.

Nope.

I don't actually believe that.

I was taught that point of etiquette—it's her again.

So the story I'm going to tell you now is hers too—it's my story, and her story.

I'd be grateful if you listened.

And if possible, when you're done listening, I'd be very happy if I could hear your story in return.

I live my life stupidly—

How do you live yours?

002

“If you can’t be medicine, be poison. Otherwise you’re nothing but water.”

That’s the kind of thing my mother would say to me.

I don’t think she was a very good mother—at least, she didn’t resemble the generally accepted image of a mother at all.

So much so that when I encountered a “mom” on TV or in a book, or in conceptual form, it wasn’t just jarring, it gave me the creeps. She was that sort of person.

Sure, the idea that all mothers are going to be the Virgin Mary is nothing more than some outdated pigeonholing, and I realize in theory that the so-called maternal instinct is nurture, not nature.

Still, I think she was a bird of a different feather.

A mother of a different feather.

“Suruga. Your life will probably be more aggravating than other people’s. It’s going to wear you out and piss you off, but that’s not because you’re better, it’s because you’re weak. All life long you’ll cradle that weakness—I pray you’ll learn to live for that aggravation.”

She loved to blow smoke up your ass with head-scratchers like that—and when she said stuff like that to me, I suppose she was treating me like a grown-up instead of a child. Which is nice and all, but a parent who doesn’t treat her child like a child is a pretty odd proposition.

Kids are supposed to remain kids in their parents’ eyes, for good.

It seems like I was only ever “this little person” in her eyes.

Whenever my friends talk about their parents, I end up feeling that much more keenly how unusual she was.

Being my parent, for me she'd been the norm.

The norm.

But it's also true that the whole time I was growing up I thought there was something weird about that norm.

I always wondered what my father saw in such a person□though I guess that amounts to nothing but a charming anecdote about how, in my innocence, I believed that a husband and wife must absolutely love each other.

If I was going to wonder, though, my question shouldn't have been why he fell in love with her, but why she went so far as to elope with him.

It's really hard to believe that she could be so passionate.

She'd had a bitter time of it.

Or so I've heard, at least.

In getting together with the Kanbaru family's eldest son, she experienced various hardships and rank prejudice, suffered many setbacks, and eloped with him in the end□

A life on the run.

Not a happy love affair, to put it mildly.

Certainly not a blessed union.

A romance against the current of happiness□on that point alone she was indeed my mother, but there remains a gap between us that's hard to reconcile.

Maybe I just prefer to think so.

I want there to be.

Maybe that's all it is—but actually, in the first place, the one who'd hate us getting lumped together might be my mother. She probably wouldn't want to be—not with a person like me who does vaguely know when to quit.

Be that as it may.

For that couple, who met their end together, like the best of friends, in a car accident, there may not have been room for anyone else, even if I was their own child, their only daughter.

That's how it seems to me.

It always has, but only the more so lately.

When she and my father died, my paternal grandparents took me in—I have no idea if I even have maternal grandparents. This might sound odd, but I have a hard time believing that person was ever "somebody's child." Incidentally, my grandparents feel endless hatred for the woman who stole their beloved only son and kicked the bucket in a virtual double suicide; even though they never tried to indoctrinate me into any kind of grudge when I was little or uttered a disparaging word in front of me, the animosity they bear towards her shows no matter how hard they try.

I wish they'd just come out and say it.

I think we might be able to get riled up together.

"As my daughter, you're already cursed. And it's not just you, the moment they're born from people, all babies are. Doesn't it give you the creeps? People birthed by other people. We live in a heartless world where the beauty and sanctity of propagating life gets rammed down our throats, but don't you feel it's a precious curse bestowed on us by God? Or is it just my imagination? No, no, my feeling that you're dear to me isn't my will, it must be God's."

She said (I think) some such thing to me, so she must have loved me in her own way, paradoxically.

Come to think of it, I remember my dad telling me: "That girl does God's living for Him." It's sweet in retrospect that he referred to his

wife as “that girl,” but I still can’t go along with that opinion.

I can’t swallow it.

How do I put this? Well, if I may: she was like the Devil.

“God or Devil, it’s the same for all that we prattle on about it, we’re nothing but their playthings. Don’t waste your time thinking about such self-evident nonsense.” that person said.

Said my mother, Toé Kanbaru, née Toé Gaen, to me.

“And rise and shine, stupid girl. The thrill of a new term begins today!”

“!”

Jolt.

I opened my eyes, shocked out of sleep by that shout. it had only been a dream, of course, but the rebuke echoing in my head was so realistic that I was fully awake in an instant.

It was an early April morning, still chilly, but in a mere instant, my entire body was drenched in sweat.

“…Aaah, aaah, aaah.”

It was the rudest of awakenings.

The rudest awakening in Kanbaru history.

I thought I might die. Araragi-senpai. my dear senior Koyomi Araragi. always grumbled about how his two adorable little sisters roused him from bed every morning, but however they go about it, I doubt they assault him in his sleep with lethal force, so there’s no way he wakes up this terrified.

Ah, that was scary.

Well, today it was a bad dream, but it’s been a long time since I had a “pleasant awakening”…

I thought this, staring at the left arm—my own left arm, bound tightly to one of my room's posts with duct tape.

"Phew…"

Performing the routine work of stripping away the tape with my right hand as usual, I slowly regained my composure.

My pulse returned to normal.

With my left arm tightly fixed to an immobile post, I couldn't roll over, so it was difficult to get a good night's sleep. I have no idea what I'll get up to in my sleep if I don't do that, though.

In my sleep. In my unconscious state. I have no idea—what I'll get up to.

If I used handcuffs or something, I might unlock them while I was unconscious, hence the duct tape. This way, if I were, for instance, to put on a raincoat and go out like a sleepwalker for a midnight stroll, I'd need to tear through the tape and make a wreck of it. Even if I couldn't prevent the sleepwalking itself, I'd at least know that I'd gone outside.

I'd know that I'd sinned.

I could avoid the sin of ignorance.

It did nothing for my night's sleep—but it was marginally better than knowing nothing.

Since that May.

Since I attacked Araragi-senpai in a trance, unconscious, asleep—ever since I was possessed by a devil, I saw fit to rely on the ridiculous restraint.

How many rolls of duct tape have I wasted?

Well, not wasted.

Because every time I woke up in the morning and saw the duct tape

still intact around my bandaged arm, I breathed a sigh of relief—thinking, Good, looks like another night has gone by without me hurting anyone.

So it wasn't a waste.

"Haha—recognizing your unconscious destructive urges is a bitter pill to swallow, isn't it, Suruga? Turns out ignorance isn't a sin, it's bliss. Most people live out their lives never facing the fact that humans are basically just talking monkeys, no different from the beasts, but you? You got screwed. Or maybe you screwed up? Not that that's why I bequeathed you the Monkey's Paw. Why did I, then? Don't ask. Questions are for losers."

I felt like I heard such a voice.

Paying it no heed, I started getting dressed.

The season was still a little cold to be sleeping naked.

I shivered, not because of the night sweat drying on my body.

My mornings began with changing the bandage on my arm, which got sticky from the tape—I thought wearing only that and nothing else, like being naked apart from an apron, was pretty chic.

Or is it just me?

003

“Good morning.”

When I went out to the living room, breakfast was waiting for me.

I’m thoroughly awful at housework, catastrophically bad at both cooking and cleaning, not even rolling on the floor bad, and it’s all because my guardians, my grandma and grandpa, are extremely meticulous people and take much too good care of me.

I wasn’t blessed in the parents department in many ways (in any way at all), but I have been as far as grandparents go.

Then again, while the food was waiting for me, my grandparents weren’t. Grandma was doing the laundry, and Grandpa was out tending the garden. Ordinarily, the ideal family sits down to breakfast all together, but that never really happened for us.

Old folks start the day early□but that’s not why.

In fact, I start my day earlier than they do. I’m in the habit of jogging 10 km x 2 every morning before breakfast.

That day, too, I’d taken not one but two turns around town.

While I’m working up a good rhythm and a pleasant feeling during my run, Grandma and Grandpa finish their breakfast. I do my best every morning to pick up the pace so I can sit and eat with them, but, well, that’s not going to happen unless I basically double my speed.

Which means it’s not going to happen at all.

“‘A real family eats together’? Come on, that’s bullshit□look, that Hanekawa girl eats with her family, but they’re not together at all, are they? In the same place, but not together. And I ate with you

most of the time, but did you think of me as family? I was your mother, but listen, were we really family?”

I finished breakfast while that voice chattered on in a corner of my head. I fully replaced the calories I burned on my run—thanks for the grub.

My auditory hallucinations were especially severe that morning, though.

The harbinger of something to come?

Or the aftereffect of something past?

…I guess I was just a bit mentally unbalanced that day on account of starting a new chapter of my life.

Really.

I was no good on my own.

I was no good at all on my own.

Thinking such thoughts, I reached for the morning paper—already somewhat wrinkled and puffed out from my grandparents having read it—and spread it out on the table.

With eyes as wide as saucers, I examined every inch, scanning all that had happened in the world yesterday. Being a regional paper, it was of course full of local news, which is exactly what I was looking for.

Stabbings, other incidents of violence.

Where and when they occurred.

I carefully checked each of those—and compared them in my head to my schedule and timetable the previous day. Recalling whether or not I had an alibi.

“…Phew.”

Finished with the newspaper, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything was okay.

Another day gone by, and I hadn’t committed any crimes.

004

Returning to my room, I noticed that my nails were getting pretty long. It was the kind of thing that didn't bother you at all if you didn't notice it, but once you did, it drove you crazy.

I surveyed my room, muttering, "Nail clippers…"

They had to be here. Somewhere in this room, there had to be nail clippers, and not just one, but probably two or three.

Suruga, put your nail clippers back where it was when you're done, my grandmother always tells me, or scolds me, I should say, so I was certain, but a diligent excavation would be required to discover them. My room was "a wee bit" messy, and finding what you were looking for was a tall order Araragi-senpai described the mess as a "sinkhole," and I have to say, he really hit the nail on the head. His way with words is something I strive to emulate.

Hmm, if I looked for the nail clippers now, I was definitely going to be late for school.

He described looking for something in my room as a "treasure hunt," by the way, hitting the nail on the head once again. True, looking for something the size of nail clippers amid this "heap after a landslide" seems hopeless.

Like looking for a needle in a haystack.

I'm sure my grandma would lend me other nail clippers, but she'd chew me out first so I was hesitant…

I didn't want to get scolded.

Sigh.

Why do nails have to grow, anyway?

“People who feel uncomfortable about their nails growing are ill-suited to life. It means they don’t want to grow up.”

My mother said that to me while she was clipping my toenails when I was little. It seemed more like a monologue than something that was actually addressed to me, but looking back on it now, maybe she was talking to me after all.

That someone’s gaze isn’t directed at you doesn’t mean the sentiment isn’t—and vice versa.

Someone who’s looking at me isn’t necessarily looking at me.

I was facing down a stark choice—either head to my grandma’s room and gird my loins for a scolding, or head to school and stop to buy new nail clippers at a convenience store on the way—when all of a sudden a third option appeared before my eyes.

To be precise, all of a sudden, when I took my uniform, fresh from the cleaners, down off the hanger on the wall and cut off the tag with a pair of scissors.

Huh.

If I had to, I could use the scissors to cut my nails.

A revelation.

A spectacular paradigm shift, a small insight that allows humanity to progress by leaps and bounds, like the seal on a glass milk bottle—though I guess I don’t see those anymore.

You might be surprised to learn that I’m a regular MacGyver, substituting things like that.

Whether to call it a paradigm shift, or adaptability, or what, I don’t know.

But this wasn’t the first time.

I once purchased a certain electrical appliance, which was great and all, but for ease of transport the box had been sealed up with

industrial-strength vinyl packing tape.

And I didn't have any scissors.

It's no easy feat to get through industrial-strength vinyl packing tape without scissors.

So what brilliant idea did Suruga Kanbaru hit upon?

"I'll cut it with my watch."

I made the bold judgment that something on the order of industrial-strength vinyl packing tape wouldn't stand a chance if the sharp side of my watch buckle could be exploited in conjunction with the principle of leverage.

More of a sharp judgment than a bold one, you might say.

And what happened?

Well.

As is so often the case with cutting-edge thinking, it was the watch buckle rather than the tape that gave.

Packing tape is really something.

What a sticky situation□(shouted quip) oh, cut it out!

Wait.

I was trying to tell you how paradigm shifts are my specialty…but ended up relating one of my fails.

Hang on a sec, there was this other time when…

Hmmm.

Maybe I'd better hold off on using scissors in place of nail clippers?

Since I was seeking a fresh start and a new outlook for the new semester, I went ahead and offered sincere praise to myself for coming up with the idea.

But that lasted only while I was cutting my right nails with my bandaged left hand.

I'm left-handed so I was using left-handed scissors, which on the flipside are difficult to use with my right hand.

It would be a real trick to cut the nails on my left hand, which was exposed at the moment.

The nails on my left, monkey hand…

"Bad move."

Not a paradigm shift at all.

More MacGuffin than MacGyver (sorry, not funny).

Fine.

It was going to stay hidden under a bandage anyway.

Just cutting half of my nails definitely left me feeling almost half-refreshed. Next, I dug out a mirror from where it was buried and trimmed the stubborn bedhead that a 20-km run, a shower, and a hairdryer had done nothing to fix.

Snip.

Somehow my hair had gotten all grown-out.

I considered a drastic stroke instead of fiddling bit by bit but couldn't work up the courage.

I guess I'm a waffler.

It must undercut everyone's image of me, but that's who I really am.

I'm a waffler.

Always putting off decisions.

No, I'm neither warm nor sweet like a waffle, so that expression

probably doesn't suit me—in which case I'm just plain old greedy.

I'm like Greed.

Desiring everything, I lose everything.

This Greed loves Hitagi Senjogahara.

Given everything in the beginning, left with nothing in the end.

That's Suruga Kanbaru, my life in a nutshell.

I'd even lost my nail clippers—okay, discussing a fatalistic view of life and my room's messiness in the same breath might get me a scolding from my senpais Senjogahara and Araragi.

I don't want to get scolded.

I really don't.

When I thought that far, I realized something.

They wouldn't take it upon themselves to scold me anymore—because they weren't around anymore.

They were gone.

Even now I felt them with me, but that was only an illusion.

Snickering at my inability to let go, I finished changing into my uniform and headed to school.

To Naoetsu High, now bereft of both Koyomi Araragi and Hitagi Senjogahara.

005

When I say it like that, it's as if those two are dead or something, but that's not the case at all. They just graduated.

They graduated, and I became a third-year.

That's all.

That's all there is to it.

With Araragi-senpai's grades, being held back had been a real possibility, but in the end the teachers granted a pardon and fudged his attendance record.

Strictly speaking, such misconduct flew in the face of due process, but after he prostrated himself in the faculty room, even Hanekawa-senpai, that paragon of impartial justice, couldn't bring herself to say anything.

The Fire Sisters are the same way; those siblings just love to perform a dogeza. I heard that his beauteous prostration took the teachers' breath away, but it was Hanekawa-senpai who told me that, so who knows if it's true.

She has a tendency to mythologize his behavior, and though it's not lost on me that I do the same thing, her words are best taken with a grain of salt.

Well, even so, she might not want to hear that from me… Of course, she and Senjogahara-senpai graduated no problem (I held a little going away party for them just last month), so as it stands I've been left behind at Naoetsu High.

No, I have plenty of friends in my year and in the grades below me, but all three of the people who got it when it came to "aberrations"□you might call them accomplices□were gone, and I

was beset with a kind of bewilderment distinct from sadness.

It was over?

Just like that?

It felt way more “I guess that’s it, then” than I’d expected—not a dramatic parting, not a devastating one, just “I guess that’s it.” I had no choice but to keep harboring the secret of my left arm, but it’s also true that a secret is something too heavy to keep harboring alone.

The three of them knew about my arm, knew what I’d done, and still stood by me. That alone was enough to ease my heart—but that was no reason.

Even as you found reasons.

“Change goes hand in hand with growing up. There’s no such thing as ‘unchanging everyday life,’ Suruga. If there were, it wouldn’t be everyday, it’d be hell.”

Another one of that person’s lines.

It wasn’t anything to utter, even by mistake, to a child, who had a ton of growing-up to do. But she didn’t treat me like a child, so what can I say.

By the way, it’s been a while now since the ruins of that cram school, so full of memories, burned to the ground—before I knew it, I’d become accustomed to seeing the post-conflagration landscape in place of that abandoned building.

What comes to mind now is a scorched field.

That, too, is change and the everyday.

Anyhow, today.

April ninth.

I—Suruga Kanbaru became a third-year.

And alone.

Just like in middle school—but at that time, I had the unshakable goal of “taking Naoetsu High’s exams and chasing after Senjogahara-senpai who graduated ahead of me.” This time I had no such goal, no aim.

Without fixing my gaze on her, not even in some far-flung future, I attended high school—all alone.

“Ah, Suruga-senpai, wassup.”

…As I ran to school, a little drunk on my thoughts, a bicycle came up beside me.

Huh.

I said all alone—but what about this kid?

Even if he’d completely slipped my mind.

Even if I’d totally forgotten.

Somehow.

“Morning, Ogi.”

Without slackening my pace, I greeted the first-year beside me—no, the second-year now, at any rate the boy on the bike.

Since he was riding one, he had no problem keeping pace with me—though I was confident that if I gave it everything I had, I could leave any granny bike in the dust.

Still, as a third-year, it was about time that I settled down a bit. I wasn’t about to run full speed on the way to school.

Here was a junior who’d taken to me, and I was never going to treat him with disdain.

“You run fast,” he said.

“Oh, I think I’ll make the first bell.”

“No no no no, I meant you’re a fast runner.”

“Ah.”

Nodding, I looked at the boy beside me.

He’d transferred to Naoetsu High sometime around the end of last year…I’ve forgotten exactly when. And his name was Ogi Oshino.

Oshino.

He said he was related to Mister Oshino, but the veracity of that was uncertain while Araragi-senpai, being who he is, swallowed the story whole, Hanekawa-senpai was openly dubious.

It’s rare for their opinions to diverge that starkly but, well, given Ogi’s, how do I put it…his ambiguous presence, it’s not surprising.

His…

His?

“Wait, Ogi… Didn’t you use to be a girl?”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been a boy all along. Ever since I came crying into this world, I’ve been a boy, without even a moment’s deviation.”

“…Right?”

“Uh huh. And I’m not one of those tomgirls that are all the rage right now.”

“Well, I don’t know about ‘all the rage.’”

It’s very much a niche trend.

But I suppose it’s just human nature to imagine that your little playground is the entire world. While the internet and whatever do seem to have opened things up, if you don’t bear in mind that it’s just a deepening, not a broadening, you end up in a world of pain.

I did.

Or rather, I became a painful character.

I don't know…

I get really fed up thinking that I might live out the rest of my life mired in this kind of remorse.

"Hmm… Anyway, of course you were a boy. My apologies, somehow I had it wrong."

"Ahaha. Getting it wrong once in a while is fine, I think? A life where we aren't forgiven even a single mistake would be stifling."

"Mistake, huh? Mistake," I repeated Ogi's word absently, glancing at my bandaged arm as it pumped back and forth with every stride. "Life is just a series of mistakes, though."

"Whoa, what's this? I get treated to a negative remark that's so unlike you, and on the first day of the new term."

Ogi tilted his head atop his bicycle.

That was dangerous.

Just as I thought so, he started pedaling faster to pull ahead of me, and with a spin-move U-turn, he was staring me straight in the face.

He was set up like a roadblock in front of me, but pedaling in reverse, he began moving backwards and didn't actually impede my progress.

…No, hang on.

I don't ride them so I'm not a hundred-percent sure, but were bicycles the kind of vehicle equipped with a mechanism that let you move backwards if you pedaled in reverse?

It's not a Segway, for chrissakes.

Even Araragi-senpai, who loved his bicycle above all else (I was the one who destroyed his beloved ride, by the way) never pulled such an oddball move…

“That’s not at all like Suruga Kanbaru, the star of Naoetsu High who led a no-name basketball team all the way to the nationals. You should be saying, ‘Life is just a series of successes.’”

“Why would I ever say something so arrogant? Who could? Get him over here so I can teach him a lesson.”

“Get him? It’s you yourself.”

“Wrong.”

“But it’s a fact.”

“That’s all in the past. Oh so long ago.”

No one remembers last year’s glories□no, of the year before last. The names of athletes who get injured and retire are fated to fade from memory.

One of the students in my year officially retired just the other day.

A new generation comes in, and you’re forgotten.

“All in the past,” Ogi echoed. “In the past, huh? Hearing that is a real buzz-kill. For a student like me, at least, who entered Naoetsu High in the hopes of becoming a star like you.”

“Liar. How can you tell such appalling lies with a straight face? Aren’t you a member of the No Extracurriculars Club?”

“Yes. But I’m their ace.”

“What do you mean, ace?”

“I leave school early every three days.”

“You’re an ace, all right.”

Ogi is exhausting to talk to.

Always keeping me off balance…which reminds me, Araragi-senpai often said the same thing about me.

In which case I really was a pain in his ass, though it was a little late for remorse. Being put in the same position now, I understood for the first time how senpais felt.

I'd text him an apology later.

I learned how to send one quite some time ago.

Even I learn.

If you think I can't learn just because I'm stupid, you're very much mistaken.

Anyway, that said, I think Ogi and I aren't much alike.

I don't really remember how we ended up on speaking terms in the first place when we're in different years and he doesn't play any sports before I knew it he was just there as though he always had been.

Suddenly on good terms with my dear seniors Araragi, Senjogahara, and Hanekawa.

It seemed very natural.

Which itself seemed totally unnatural.

…But anyway, I guess with the three of them gone, it's just me and him.

That's rough.

Maybe rougher than being alone.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's nothing…" I wasn't going to say Life's going to suck with only you around for company to his face.

"While we're at it, 'past' is written with the characters for 'mistake' and 'gone.' Does that mean the past is a mistake as such, sui generis?"

“…”

I considered telling him that he wasn’t using the phrase “sui generis” correctly, but decided not to. I’d hate to be thought of as the kind of senior who puffs herself up by nitpicking a younger schoolmate’s usage.

Still, it was a magnificent self-contradiction for a conversation about a word’s meaning to include a misused phrase.

“Come to think of it,” Ogi continued, “the word ‘future’ is written with a negative prefix and ‘come.’ Is human life one big cock-up then, past and future?”

He kept pedaling backwards as he said this kept riding in reverse. There was no rearview mirror unlike on a motorbike, so it really was quite dangerous.

It looked precarious.

I started to get this uneasy, probably unjustified feeling that he’d keep riding backwards for as long as I kept on running, so I slowly came to a stop.

“Oops. What’s wrong? Is your side splitting from running too much?” Ogi asked, and just as I’d hoped, he put on the brakes not by squeezing either hand, but via the friction generated by letting the soles of his shoes scrape against the ground.

Every single thing he did was precarious.

I was on pins and needles.

“No part of my body would start hurting from running just a couple of miles,” I shut down Ogi’s question and strode off just like that. It seemed (the mechanism was still unclear to me) he couldn’t ride backwards at a slow pace, and so, turning around his bike reluctantly, I imagine he resumed accompanying me in a normal fashion.

Seemingly rebellious, an obedient kid.

Seemingly twisted, straight as an arrow.

As far as juniors these days went, he was surprisingly easy to handle—if I may be allowed to make such an evaluation as someone who coaxed on my middle- and high-school athletics clubs.

“Won’t you be late if you walk?”

“It’s fine, I’ll dash when I get to the final climb.”

“Yikes, gimme a break. In that case it’ll only be me who’s late. I’m weak on climbs.”

“Then go on ahead.”

“Please. Why would I throw away the honor of arriving at school beside the universally admired Suruga Kanbaru over something as insignificant as being marked tardy?”

“Why are you kissing up to me? It’s not like I’m a star or anything.”

“But you are a star. No, maybe mastar is more like it.”

“Mastar… In any case, that was a long time ago.”

“Well, sure, you may have lost some of your former charisma… But even now you have rabid fans who’re rooting for you.”

“That’s nice to know, if true… But what in the world are they rooting for? I don’t play basketball anymore.”

And words like “rabid” scare me.

They remind me of when I was scared of myself.

Of when I was like a rabid animal.

“A star is a star no matter what. Existing is all that matters. Existing, and shining.”

“But I’m not shining, not anymore. I’ve gone dark.”

“We’re going around in circles, aren’t we—sure, you may not be

nationally famous at the moment, but you're still quite the local celebrity."

"I don't remember being so tied to the area… Ogi, is there something you need to tell me? Because I don't think we'd be having this conversation otherwise."

"Huh."

Ogi blinked in surprise.

He had something of a tendency to ham it up.

Even his being alive seemed deliberate.

To put it simply, it was like he was playing a "character"□which upset me.

I felt as though I was slowly being shown what I disliked about myself.

Slowly.

But steadily.

"What a cold thing to say. I might get frostbite. Can't I talk to you without a specific reason?"

"Well, actually, I guess it'd be worse if you did have a reason."

"Hahaha, now we're getting warm."

Laughing, Ogi cut to the chase. It was his peculiar conversational technique to do so with abnormal suddenness after having beaten around the bush forever, which certainly reminded me of our friend in the Hawaiian shirt.

"Have you heard the rumors about Lord Devil?"

Lord Devil?

006

I didn't want to be late on the first day of the new term—I wasn't anxious about my attendance record, but I was not so unfeeling as to be unaffected by the sad spectacle Araragi-senpai had presented there at the end (even "wretched" would be an understatement)—so regardless of what Ogi might say, I dashed full speed up the last hill and slipped through the school gates along with the first bell.

He was being truthful about being weak on the uphill, and I left him in the dust. Though before we even get to strengths and weaknesses, granny bikes are too heavy to be suited to climbing.

Since it could run backwards, I thought his bike might also be remodeled to improve its climbing power, but evidently the engineer hadn't performed that much surgery on it.

His voice at my back sounded as though he was about to cry, and I winced as I dashed on, but it's not like I'd promised we would "run together!"

Ogi being Ogi, I believe he didn't end up being late. And even if he did, I'm sure that he wheedled his way out of it with his silver tongue.

So I switched gears.

The quick mental switch is my specialty.

Which probably means that I'm stupid.

Before heading to the school building, I went to the gym for my new class assignment. Who would be in my class this year, who would be in a different one? Let's see now, hmm, okay, okay. Overall, it was a satisfying reshuffle.

I'd never really thought about it before, but do the teachers all have

a big discussion and make the assignments together? Like, which students shouldn't be in the same class, which groups should be kept together, etc.?

It was like that song, Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match.

Actually, the work of dividing up the students seems kind of fun.

Contemplating who might make friends with whom in the game of Ideal Class Assignment, I headed to my new classroom.

A third-year classroom.

Oddly enough—though that sounds overblown and staged, like I'm forcibly upping the dramatic stakes—it was the same classroom my seniors Araragi, Senjogahara, and Hanekawa had been in last year.

I didn't—not think anything of it.

In other words, I did something.

The classroom was quiet. Everyone still seemed to be at the gym, rejoicing or lamenting. Perhaps they were having a hard time adjusting to the prospect of their new classes, and new classmates.

I wandered idly about, wondering where my senpais had sat. I figured there was no way to tell, until I came upon a desk that radiated a powerful individuality.

Which is to say.

A desk with "Koyomi Araragi" chiseled deeply into the surface—hey, hey!

For a moment I was appalled that my dear senior had been so aggressively self-assertive, but when I really thought about it, I couldn't imagine him coming to school with a chisel in the first place.

In other words, the desk must have been Senjogahara-senpai's.

I could easily imagine her whiling away the time during class by

carving her sweetheart's name into her desk, and that brought a faint smile to my lips.

A faint smile—you couldn't exactly call it heart-warming.

I can't even begin to picture Araragi-senpai's reaction when he discovered the carving, I thought as I sat down at the desk.

It was the first day, the first class, so maybe we really should have sat by student number, but a precedent would be set by whatever rule was cemented first.

The rule that I cemented by sitting down first: "sit wherever you like."

Occupying a seat where someone I'd once longed for had thought about her sweetheart shined a ray of light into the new life I was beginning; it also brought a certain wistful feeling.

"Morning, Rugaaa! After two years, we're finally in the same class!"

Just as I was giving myself over to sentiment, Higasa, who seemed to have appeared in the classroom out of nowhere, sat down in the seat in front of me.

She was a contemporary of mine from the basketball team.

She'd been vice captain last year, and when I quit she took over for me as captain—she insisted that she was just the acting captain, but the other day she finally retired as well, without my big comeback ever becoming a reality.

Anyone could see she was a jock, but like most everyone else around here, she entered the auspicious ranks of students preparing for university entrance exams.

Me?

I was preparing for them too, of course.

If not for my left arm, I could have gotten a scholarship to an athletic college on the strength of my basketball record. But with

my professed injury, even if I were scouted, I'd have to decline. I got depressed when I thought about the bookish life stretching out before me, even though I had brought it on myself.

Studying is not my forte.

I'm stupid.

In the first place, it was only because I had a strong motivation□chasing after my senior Senjogahara□that I ever got into this prep school.

"Yup, so we are," I responded.

Having played basketball together, Higasa and I had bonded, but this was the first time we were in the same class.

It felt somehow ironic that it finally happened only after we both quit the team.

Or maybe it wasn't ironic?

Maybe it was commonplace?

We graduate without ever being in the same class as most of the students in our year, so I guess there's no need to force some kind of special meaning onto it.

"Class assignment time has made me blue ever since elementary school, but I'm relieved that I'm in the same class as you, Ruga."

"Blue? Why?"

"Oh, because I'm shy."

"Huh."

"The words 'find someone you want to pair up with' scare me more than anything in the world."

"How come? Doesn't being able to pair up with someone you like make you happy?"

I didn't really buy that Higasa, even more of a jock than I am, was shy, but often our sense of ourselves is at odds with reality.

The me in my mind is probably different from the way other people think of me, but at the same time, I feel like it's not a question of one or the other being right.

Rightness wavers according to perspective.

Last year taught me that.

"It's about a month after class assignments that I really get blue, though."

"How come?"

"Because I'm forced to watch people I felt close with in my previous class becoming close with other people from their new class."

"Forced…"

"Your friends making other friends is always kind of a bad feeling. The friend of my friend is my enemy," remarked Higasa, her shoulders sagging.

Coming out with an audacious line that everybody thinks but can't actually say made me think she was definitely a jock and not really shy at all, but maybe she just couldn't hide her true feelings.

At first.

I'd probably felt the same way upon witnessing the relationship between my seniors. So I understood all too well when Higasa put it into words.

…But it was a pretty selfish feeling.

Though feelings are all basically selfish.

"Don't you make new friends too, Higasa?"

"I will. Still… All through life we'll have to keep dealing with new

class and seat assignments, so to speak, and we'll become estranged from good friends, from people we like, people we love, even though we never had a falling out or anything. When I think about that, my mood doesn't get blue, it gets pitch black."

"Hmm, for sure," I nodded at Higasa. Her words made all kinds of sense to me. "Life is nothing but new class and seat assignments."

My ties with Araragi-senpai and Senjogahara-senpai had made for such fun that it seemed like it could go on forever. But forget about forever, it couldn't go on in the same way the moment they graduated.

They had to forge new relationships in new places□and it was more pressing for them than for me, continuing on in the same high school as I was.

Araragi-senpai seems like he might be the worst in the world at that kind of transition.

Even now he sends me texts with astounding frequency.

And over half of them are dirty jokes.

I may be largely to blame, but he nevertheless seems to be harboring a gross misunderstanding about me.

Our new classmates began to trickle in after that. Our homeroom teacher arrived last, a touch on the late side, and began pouring forth a veritable fountain of what you might call Exam Prep for Dummies.

Study like you're going to waste an entire year of your life.

The teacher slipped that in to get a laugh, I imagine, but his words of course reminded me of my mother.

"Rugaaa, walk home with us," Higasa invited me to join her and the new group of friends she'd already made (definitely not shy), but I politely excused myself.

There was somewhere I had to go, but I couldn't tell her, so I made

up an appropriate excuse: “I need to pick up some study guides on my way home.”

I can lie with total composure.

And not much in the way of guilt.

“What? Ruga, did you actually swallow everything the teacher was saying? You gotta just let it slide.”

“No, it’s not like that. But if I don’t try and make up for how behind I am, I definitely won’t have the grades to get into college.”

“Right, ’cause you’re stupid.”

She just came out and said it.

How does she know?

It’s supposed to be a secret!

Higasa’s shrewd in her own way, so she’s figured out how to get decent grades. She shared with me once that her goal was to just keep it up and get into a decent college.

A decent life.

That’s her motto.

Since she doesn’t seem to be particularly set on an athletic college or playing for a corporate team, I guess basketball will just be a “high school memory” for her.

No.

Not just for her.

For most people, high school is nothing but a time to create memories—to be perfectly honest, it’s three years wasted, not just one.

Anyone who spends these three years trying to find themselves instead of creating memories belongs to a tiny minority—I thought I

was a member of that minority, but apparently wasn't, and in fact, my three years seem like they might come to a close without much in the way of memories, either.

Seriously, though, these past two years.

What have I been doing?

And this remaining year—how was I going to spend it?

"'Kay, see you tomorrow."

"Yup—oh, hang on, Higasa."

I asked her. Just to be sure, as casually as possible.

"Have you heard about Lord Devil?"

"Whun?" From that initial reaction I was worried that she hadn't, and that I shouldn't have asked, but the next words out of her mouth were, "How does an optimist like you know about that rumor?"

007

Lord Devil has an odd ring to it.

Why address the Devil, in all his accursed unholiness, with an honorific title? But I suppose if you simply think of the Devil as God's opposite number, then just like you call God "Lord God," it makes sense to call the Devil "Lord Devil."

And while he may be the Devil, he certainly occupies a superior position to humans, so I guess it'd be pretty rude to talk about him without showing some respect.

Though from what I heard, it was meant to be more sarcastic than polite.

Happens all the time.

Still, that kind of idle "joking" can invite dire consequences, as I know all too well.

It was some kind of charm and a fad among Naoetsu High students□because of the thing with Sengoku, I'm sensitive when it comes to so-called charms, but according to what Ogi had told me, maybe I was overreacting.

Just an innocent rumor.

That if you turn to Lord Devil for help with your problems or worries, he'll solve them for you without fail□though the inclusion of that phrase made it seem less convincing, not more.

Yet no matter how phony, no matter if it were one of Deishu Kaiki's cons, I'd have had to do something about a "devil" who "solves your problems" even if there hadn't been the thing with Sengoku.

Because.

In that case Lord Devil could be me.

“Of course, there’s apparently one condition to the whole ‘without fail’ thing—they say Lord Devil won’t accept any over-the-top requests,” Ogi had explained.

His tone was as carefree as ever, which is to say, he made it seem like it was all just inconsequential gossip—no, it really was nothing more than carefree gossip.

For him.

Even if Ogi knew about my left arm, knew what I’d done.

All talk was idle talk to him.

Everything was inconsequential for him.

“Evidently the standard for over-the-top is ‘cases where you should go to the police.’”

What the heck.

That was weirdly particular, or raw.

At least, it didn’t seem like a condition a devil would give for “granting wishes”—even if it was my just deserts, a piece of my body, and a piece of my soul, had been taken from me.

“Naturally. Because this Lord Devil seems to be a particular, and raw, human being.”

“Human…”

“They say she’s a girl around high school age.”

“In other words, some high school girl is misrepresenting herself as a ‘devil’ and dispensing advice to students at Naoetsu High?”

A high school girl.

Sounded more and more—like me.

“Well, yes, but I’m not so sure about the misrepresenting part.”

We might be dealing with the real thing, Ogi insinuated.

“But isn’t she a particular and raw human being?”

“A particular and raw human being isn’t necessarily not a devil. I mean if she can solve your problems ‘without fail,’ she’s no ordinary kind soul.”

“…”

If possible, I wanted to get more information out of Ogi, but I didn’t want to give him the impression that I was “hungry for it,” and I’d feigned a disinterested “huh.”

I have to admit that as a display of seniority it was quite petty, but he had this air and you hesitated to bombard him with questions.

It seemed uncool.

Araragi-senpai would probably have forged ahead anyway, heedless of that vibe, and when I realized that I would never be like him, it brought me down.

That said, whether or not Higasa knew anything about it, I intended to act, and since she did, it at least seemed like Ogi hadn’t been messing with me (I might get a bad rap for being paranoid, but he does have a prior record of talking bullshit).

From what Higasa said, though, it wasn’t as positive a rumor as he made it out to be on the contrary, I got kind of a negative impression.

She suggested that it wasn’t a rumor an optimist would have heard of which made it a rumor familiar only to pessimists.

Yup.

A pessimist like I used to be.

…Then again, there’s no such thing as a pure optimist, or a pure

pessimist. No matter who you are, sometimes things are looking up, sometimes things are looking down, sometimes you've got to look sideways.

Right. Being yourself, and individuality, are illusions.

Failing to understand that will just bring you serious pain—like when I forced an arbitrary illusion, an arbitrary ideal, onto Senjogahara-senpai and ended up angry, and imploded.

And crucially—a "devil" was involved in that as well. Of course, that was a crybaby devil, a low-level devil, not at all the kind of splendid aberration that you'd address as "Lord."

Higasa clearly didn't want to talk about it—I had a pretty relaxed relationship with her, unlike with Ogi, and she was someone I could get real with, but there was a time and a place for it. Grilling her about this devil in front of her new friends from her new class would have been cruel, so I fudged things appropriately.

"It's nothing, I just got a text from my senior Araragi about it, that's all."

"Araragi-senpai?!" "Kanbaru, did you just say 'Araragi'?!" "Like, that Araragi?!" "The legendary one?!" "The legendary Mister Araragi?!" "A legendary text from the legendary Mister Araragi?!" "What-what-what-what, Kanbaru is texting buddies with that Araragi?!" "No way?!" "What is he up to now?!"

The hullaballoo attracted another group of girls who'd been standing far away. Forget appropriately, I'd fudged things monumentally…

Hmmm.

My senior Araragi was a hot ticket everywhere.

He was the star, not me. A superstar.

I would have to wait and bring in Higasa for questioning another day. I decided to spend my afterschool hours investigating Lord Devil.

My career preparing for exams seemed over before it even started, but the mentee apple doesn't fall far from the mentor tree.

Even if I'll never measure up.

008

“Lord Devil? Yeah, I’ve heard the rumors. Yay! I thought maybe Tsukihi would be mobilizing soon, so I’ve secretly been idling my motor for a while. Burning justice isn’t environmentally friendly, you know!”

This conversation was happening via cell phone.

Karen sounded cheerful, but I’ve never known her not to be.

Interesting.

So the rumor wasn’t just circulating among Naoetsu High students.

“And, what about this Lord Devil?”

“Nothing really□listen, Karen. Do you know how I can meet Lord Devil?”

“Let’s see…”

I was worried that asking so bluntly might put her on guard and make her clam up, but she blabbed everything she knew like an innocent child who’s completely free of doubt.

We’re not even talking loose lips.

It’s kind of unfair, when I sought the info that I needed and she provided me with way more, but I thought to myself, You can’t tell this girl your secrets, which would be my little secret.

“Is something up? Ah, Miss Suruga, are you looking for Lord Devil’s advice about something?”

“No, not a chance,” I responded, though that may have been somewhat disingenuous, given that a “devil” had in fact granted a

wish for me in the past.

No, not somewhat.

Completely disingenuous.

I felt guilt building up like sediment in my soul as I exploited the respect a younger girl had for me.

“Hmm, okay then,” she said.

…So trusting.

Her apparent abdication of all doubt actually mitigated my feelings of guilt. That open nature must have been one of the reasons why she’d been so popular in middle school that her name was known all over town.

The Araragi family has superb DNA.

“Cool, thanks. So, when do you think the Fire Sisters might be springing into action?”

“What? No, no, no, Miss Suruga. The Fire Sisters won’t be.” I’d asked thinking that it would be bad, or at least awkward, if they butted in on-site, but Karen’s reply took care of that concern. “C’mon, the Fire Sisters disbanded the other day.”

“Oh yeah, you did.”

They did.

The formal name of the Fire Sisters, comprised of Karen and Tsukihi Araragi, had been The Tsuganoki Second Middle School Fire Sisters, but at the end of this past school year, Karen, the elder, had ridden the escalator up from Tsuganoki MS2 to Tsuganoki High, so the whole premise for the name had fallen apart.

I had maybe heard that they’d held a magnificent party last month to celebrate its disbanding□remembered their brother racing around afterwards to clean up.

He complained that they were making his life difficult right up to the bitter end, but really I think he was just forlorn that it was the bitter end—maybe I'm being sentimental, though.

"Yup. Now that Tsukihi's all alone at Tsuganoki Second Middle, she's operating under the name Moon Fire."

"Moon Fire…"

That was certainly what the characters in her name meant, but it sounded corny.

Like some crappy superhero team.

Got to be careful though, there might be a team called just that, so let me keep that to myself.

"Not that anything's changed, we're still working together same as before—still, when I realize that we're not the Fire Sisters anymore, even though I'm idling on standby, it gives me pause. And I'm surprised by where I am," Karen said, her tone as offhanded as ever, but what she said gave me plenty to think about. "I guess this is growing up, huh?"

"I think it's just life."

Recalling my conversation with Higasa, I at least managed to sound like a senpai.

Life, where class and seat assignments are everything.

And where—graduating is everything.

"Yup. You're right," Karen agreed. "You can't go on the same way forever. Like, when I measured myself yesterday, I'd gotten taller."

"…"

Still growing, Karen?

You're already over five feet nine…

Very enviable, from a basketball perspective.

“Well, when Tsukihi enters high school, you guys can be the Tsuganoki High Fire Sisters, right?”

I knew even as I said it that it was nothing but a comforting lie.

Hitagi Senjogahara and I had been called the Valhalla Duo at Kiyokaze Middle School, but even after I got to Naoetsu High and we were back on speaking terms, Araragi-senpai was the only one who called us that again.

Well, whatever.

When it comes to relationships, names are only suitable for this or that phase—and even if it seems like they’ll hold together forever, it’s a pretty sure bet that they won’t.

Just like what seems to be a single flow is in fact the aggregate of tiny individual droplets, ultimately independent of one another—maybe our relationships with other people can’t be contained by force with the same set of words.

“Anyhow, we’re getting sidetracked,” Karen said. “This is different from what happened last year over summer break—Tsukihi seems reluctant since the rumors don’t involve any actual victims.”

“Hmm…”

“Anyway, calling yourself a devil and offering advice to people? From that alone, it’s clear that this chick is no great shakes.”

“…There’s no chance that this Lord Devil is an actual devil?”

“Huh? Wha? Ahaha,” Karen let slip a stunned sound first, as though my words had taken her unawares, before her voice rose into a guffaw. “What the hell are you talking about? Devils don’t exist in the real world. I’m a high school student now, I don’t believe in monsters.”

“…”

Well, maybe.

Karen, at least, might go on with her life without having to deal with any aberrations—but at the same time, I know all too well that there's no guarantee of that.

Higasa said it too.

That it was weird for me to involve myself with Lord Devil—likely anyone would say the same. Even Araragi-senpai, who knows about my arm and everything.

He and Senjogahara-senpai know that I turned to a devil for help last year when I "wasn't in my right mind"—and I'm glad they think of it that way.

But the fact is.

When I called upon that devil—I knew exactly what I was doing.

I put myself in his hands, played up to him, submitted to him—served him.

"There are no monsters in this world. Except maybe for my brother. Check this out, Miss Suruga, my brother is really something. Recently he burst into my room half-naked, saying, 'I've got some free time, so let's play!' and before I knew what was happening, he took these nail clippers to my skin—"

"Should I really be hearing this?"

Shouldn't that remain a secret between siblings?

Even if she did ask me to listen.

Half-naked?

Nail clippers?

Even I felt kind of turned off by those words being used in tandem.

Nail clippers…

I'd congratulated myself for the idea of using regular scissors to cut my nails, but I was just a noob.

"That's the weird thing. My brother, who never shied away from proclaiming how totally annoying his little sisters were, or how he wouldn't show up at our funerals, suddenly wants to hang out with me the second I've graduated from middle school. Maybe that's part of growing up, too?"

"…"

I earnestly hoped that it wasn't because Karen had made a career change from middle school girl to high school girl. I needed to ask Tsukihi about his attitude towards her—though I haven't had much contact with her, a third-year middle schooler, as of yet.

Good grief.

He'd been ever vigilant against the possibility that I might get my paws on his little sisters, but I had the opposite impression as Karen: that regardless of getting older, graduating, regardless of whatever else might change—Koyomi Araragi would always be Koyomi Araragi.

"Okay, Karen. Why don't you come over to my house one of these days so we can hang out again. Then we can really talk things over."

"Oooh, that makes me so happy! Thanks for the invitation."

"All right. I hope you make lots of new friends in your new environment," I told her, unnecessarily, before hanging up.

Learning how to text and use a cell phone like everybody else, and now getting to the point where I could chat so amiably with Karen, whereas I used to be so anxious about interacting with her—since she was Araragi-senpai's little sister—yup.

I would keep going like this from now on, transforming each new stimulus into something I didn't have to think twice about.

There is no "unchanging everyday life."

The everyday is something we fashion thus.

Anyway.

As Araragi-senpai would say, And now back to our regular programming.

According to the information I obtained from Karen, there were three methods of getting ahold of Lord Devil, and these three routes were not parallel but graded.

In order of difficulty, you might say.

Provisionally classifying them for the gamer mind, let's call them Easy, Normal, and Hard—the lowest level of difficulty being a letter.

Write your problem out by hand on a piece of paper, seal it in an envelope, and leave it at a designated location—which apparently varies depending on the occasion, from a bench in the park to a locker at the train station.

That's it.

And if that letter suddenly disappears, Lord Devil is supposed to have taken your case—while if the letter remains there forever, it's regrettably been declined.

Seems like a pretty slipshod way of getting help with your problems, but that's Easy Mode, so what can you do?

Low risk yields low return—a basic economic principle.

On the other hand, it's probably a bit more comfortable for the applicant, who can avoid having any direct contact with Lord Devil.

So, what about Normal Mode? This consists of a call. A mode of communication one step more advanced, and more intimate, than a letter.

This is direct conversation, albeit over the phone, with Lord Devil, so the emotional difficulty level goes up—however, it also renders literary talent unnecessary in expressing your thoughts.

You can express the urgency of your worries with only the clumsiest words at your disposal. In fact, such clumsiness might be even more effective.

Apparently it's fine to call from a private number, and if you want to get across the gravity of your situation, it might be better to select Normal over Easy—the number to call also varies, though it seems to always be a cell phone.

The voice of the person on the other end is muffled, like there's a handkerchief over the mouthpiece or something, so you can't tell if it's a man or a woman. And they barely say anything at all, by which token it barely constitutes a conversation. Simply offering responses on the level of nods and prompts, they don't urge you on like a therapist.

In other words, an answering machine onto which you unilaterally unload your worries—I guess.

At the end, the voice on the other end tells you whether or not they'll accept your case. I can only imagine how it would feel to pour out all your worries only to be curtly refused, but I'd say that at least insofar as that refusal is clear and immediate, it's kinder than Easy Mode, where it remains ambiguous whether or not your plea has been rejected.

Hearing about this Normal Mode made me think the whole thing had to be the work of a human posing as a "devil" after all, just like Karen said.

Not that humans can't be devils—but.

A phone—a cell phone, no less, feels… How can I put this, it feels too real. Totally disconnected from the world of aberrations.

But since I couldn't be completely sure of that, I had to see things through to the end.

And finally, Hard Mode. Having followed me this far, you should have an idea, but this is the option to meet Lord Devil in person. And naturally, this was the option I chose.

“So, where do I go if I want to meet Lord Devil today?”

“Let’s see… That varies too, and it’s a crapshoot whether you’ll actually find her. If you don’t, then apparently it means your case has been declined,” Karen said by way of preamble to revealing the location. “At the moment□”

Once I’d heard the location, I didn’t really have a choice anymore□I no longer had any other option. Was it really just a coincidence?

That at the moment, the location was those ruins□

The ruins of that abandoned cram school.

So full of memories, now nothing but a burnt field.

009

Why was that abandoned cram school (where Mèmè Oshino, the authority on all things monstrous, had headquartered himself while he was in town) so full of memories for me? Well, I did engage my dear senior in a no-holds-barred battle in one of the rooms and thereafter stayed up through any number of nights there on aberration-related business—not to mention, I had a front-row seat when the building burned to the ground—but that isn't why.

Well, that's part of it, of course, and to say those things contributed wouldn't be a lie, but there was another, more fundamental reason.

I didn't tell Araragi-senpai this.

Or rather, I couldn't tell him.

And I still haven't.

But there was a time—before the cram school was abandoned, when it still functioned as a cram school—that I was a student there.

Specifically it was during my second and third years in middle school—I had found out that my other dear senior was going on to Naoetsu High, and knowing that it was highly doubtful I could get in with my grades, I begged my grandparents to let me take extra classes. And (what have I got to hide now?) it was that selfsame Eikow Cram School that I attended.

Of course, it was while I was a pupil there that the school fell on hard times and had to close. You wouldn't have known it then, given the healthy number of elementary and middle school students studying there, but I heard later that the salaries of the instructors they hired to try and combat the big-name competition by the station were just too high, and they couldn't turn a profit—I found it really hard to come to terms with the fact that my beloved teachers,

with whose help I improved my grades enough to get into Naoetsu High, were responsible for the financial distress that ultimately resulted in the school's collapse.

In any case, one of the desks Mister Oshino or Araragi-senpai or Shinobu used as a bed may well have been the one I'd used as a student there.

Which means, exactly nothing at all.

Sure, it's a memory, but it isn't important to me—and the reason I haven't told Araragi-senpai or anyone else is that it simply hasn't come up, it was never the right time.

If the last vestiges of the cram school that somehow survived the fire were to disappear completely from this world—I wouldn't feel sad, wouldn't feel even a twinge of heartbreak.

How can I put this—well, it'll sound cold but I'll just come out and say it, but when I became a high school student, the memories that connected me to that place "expired."

Even while I was a student there, and though it had been my idea in the first place (I couldn't feel sorrier about this towards my grandma and grandpa who ponied up the fees), I resented having to attend a cram school—because I was frantic about it conflicting with my schedule for basketball practice.

Therefore.

And so.

When the cram school did fall on hard times and closed—I feared, needless to say, that it was because I'd made a wish.

…Which might be why I couldn't tell anyone.

In hindsight, at least, it seems like that may have been what was going on, but—either way I suppose I was bound to the place in some fashion or another.

Bound to it more tightly than Mister Oshino, who used it as his

headquarters, more tightly than Araragi-senpai, who bedded down there from time to time—I say this because I ended up there again even after it had burned down, ended up at that place that was finished for everyone.

“Go ahead and kid yourself that the path you’re on now leads to your dreams for the future—the reality is that most of the time, it’s simply a one-way street running right into the past, and people are just going the wrong way. What’s more, the traffic enforcement on that one-way street is so strict that if you accidentally look back over your shoulder, they’ll take your soul.”

My mother once told me that, but you know, it’s pretty much impossible to walk without ever looking behind you.

So I ended my phone conversation with Karen and B-dashed straight over to the burnt field where the former abandoned cram school ruins (oh, come on) stood—and there.

There.

I came face to face with Lord Devil.

I call it a burnt field, but it had been about six months since the building had burned down, and the municipal government hadn’t been idle. They’d cleared the site with bulldozers, so it’d be more accurate to call it a plain old vacant lot with not a blade of grass to be seen, but—in the center of that vacant lot.

There was a girl with a crutch.

A girl around my own age.

Around high-school age—just as Ogi said, I suppose. It felt inevitable and still rubbed me the wrong way somehow.

She was wearing a jersey—which reminded me of Karen and her year-round attire, partly because I’d just spoken to her, but if Karen looked sporty in a jersey, this girl looked sloppy.

Her jersey was baggy.

So big it looked like pajamas—just sloppy.

Her rumpled hair appeared to have been neither combed nor untangled and was lightened to a tea-colored brown, which added to the impression—or rather, it was the first time I'd actually seen anyone with hair dyed that color.

From what I gather it's not that uncommon in this day and age, but this is a rural town, after all, so the most I ever see is the swim team's hair looking faded from too much immersion in chlorinated water (and of course Shinobu's blond hair), so naturally it made me feel timid.

In a certain sense, dyed-brown hair was more frightening to me than a devil.

Which is why—which is precisely why I turned defiant instead.

No.

That wasn't the only reason.

There was another.

"…Even though I offer three options, almost every kid sticks to the first one."

She spoke first while I was waffling about how to break the ice, unsure how to address her.

And that's when I realized she was looking at me.

The fake-brunette devil was looking at me.

"Seven out of ten people are glad to have their appeal to Lord Devil take the form of a letter—and two out of the remaining three opt for a phone call."

"And the last one comes to meet you face to face…like this?"

"No, the last one gives up. When faced with the third option. The kid who comes to meet Lord Devil is number eleven out of ten."

Her manner of speaking was even more boyish than mine.

Her voice was low, and calm—and the pace of her speech was bizarrely languid. Not in a charming laid-back-dude kind of way, though, just sluggish—or (and I'd prefer to avoid using this word, given the strong negative nuance) maybe "slow" just about perfectly captures it.

I got impatient waiting for her next word.

That's the pace we're talking about here.

Like a slowed-down version of a recording you're used to hearing played at a certain speed.

"And those kids are usually dealing with genuinely serious problems, so I refer them to the police or a lawyer, or to Child Protective Services. Only two eleven-out-of-tens have ever come to see Lord Devil, and I dealt with both of them that way—but," she said with a lazy stare, "that's not why you're here, is it, Suruga Kanbaru?"

Hearing my name out of the blue, my heart leapt into my mouth.

Not because I was surprised that a stranger knew my name—nor was it how she knew my name without being told thanks to some great and mysterious power, being Lord Devil and all.

"You're right, Roka Numachi," I said.

Said her name.

And when I did, she—Numachi grinned for the first time and returned, "I'm pleased you remember me."

Yup.

I didn't recognize her at first on account of the dyed hair, but Lord Devil was an old acquaintance of mine.

I didn't strictly speaking remember her face, though—it was the crutch she was holding on her left side that tipped me off.

Roka Numachi.

We had crossed swords in middle school, when she was playing basketball for another school in the district.

She'd been more than a rival—"archenemy" was more like it, really—and we'd confronted each other countless times.

I don't have any clear memories of losing against her, but I don't distinctly remember beating her, either.

If I was an offensive player specializing in the fast break, Numachi's specialty was a loitering defense. There were rumors that she'd once completely shut out an opposing team, but who knows if that's true…

Her clothes and her "slow" speech made a little more sense as elements of her personality when I recalled her playing style.

She'd been an opponent, though, so while I knew her by sight in middle school, I'd never conversed with her like this…

"Heheh, Kanbaru—that left arm of yours." Numachi pointed at my bandaged arm with her right hand, the one not holding the crutch. "I guess the rumors that you hurt yourself were true. So we're peas in a pod. Seriously, star players don't handle injuries very well. Or is it arrogant of me to refer to my past self as a star? No, you wouldn't think so, Kanbaru—"

"…"

I looked at Numachi's left leg without making a reply.

It was hard to tell at a glance since her oversized jersey was so baggy, but if you looked carefully, her left and right legs weren't the same width. I only noticed the difference because I knew what to look for, but—her left leg.

She had a plaster cast—on her left leg.

Solid.

Firm.

Protected from any impact.

Protected from the world.

Because of which, she wasn't wearing a shoe on her left foot—her bare toes were touching the ground.

An injury—to her left leg.

Uh huh.

Hence the crutch.

During the final tournament of our junior high years—right before her school was about to face ours, Numachi broke her left leg in a collision during the game, and as a result she was forced to retire; or rather, the injury hadn't completely healed yet, as far as I could tell—and if it hadn't three years later, it must have been the kind that haunts you for the rest of your life.

It was a hard subject to broach, and now wasn't the time.

"Did your injury come from an on-court collision too?" she just went ahead and broached the unbroachable.

She may very well have been commiserating with me for having to retire due to an injury, but if that was it, all I could do was hang my head.

I didn't deserve a medal for what happened to my arm—it was a mistake I made in the past, nothing more. Even putting our injuries in the same ballpark was disrespectful.

"Yeah, well," I nodded vaguely, unable to tell her the truth.

"That's Naoetsu High's uniform, right? So you made it to the nationals with that prep school… Amazing. Plus, you were smart."

"No, not really…" I corrected, looking at Numachi's jersey.

It was flashy, a bright red.

A brand name was stitched into the chest, but at that distance I couldn't make it out—if it were famous I'd recognize it even from far away, so it had to be some minor one.

Even if it wasn't, it didn't look like a school training outfit, to say the least.

"Oh? Me? I'm not going to school. Rehab made a hash of exams for me. Now I'm just living it up as a part-timing freelancer."

Though with this leg, I can't seem to get hired anywhere. So when I say freelance, I actually mean unemployed, Numachi elaborated, thrusting her right hand into the pocket of her jersey.

Not going to school.

In that sense, then, Ogi was wrong to call her a high school girl. I felt somewhat relieved by that, which goes to show my personality isn't as cut and dry as everyone thinks.

"Which is why I'm able to be Lord Devil."

"…"

"Making the most of my free time, you know?"

Saying this, she pulled a cell phone out of her pocket—and pressed a few buttons and put it back.

Checking her messages, it seemed.

Had there been a call for Lord Devil from somewhere—from someone? No, in that case, she would have answered the phone, so maybe it was simply a performance for my benefit.

In middle school, she'd do the same kind of thing on the court—she excelled at messing with the heads of the players she was up against.

"So because you couldn't get a job after you injured your leg—you

became Lord Devil in place of a part-time gig?”

“Huh?”

Numachi’s face registered surprise at this.

This time it didn’t appear to be a performance, she seemed properly stunned by the conclusion I’d come to—but who knows, maybe it was all part of her act.

Let me repeat that I never knew her well enough to learn to read her expressions.

“No, no, no—you’ve got it all wrong, Kanbaru. I don’t know what you’ve heard, or from whom, but you’ve got it all wrong.”

“What have I got wrong?”

As far as the what and from whom went—the answer was Lord Devil and from Ogi, but…

“I’m Lord Devil, sure, but I don’t make any money from it.”

It’s a free counseling service, Numachi footnoted.

Her reply caught me off guard—but then, neither Ogi nor Higasa, nor Karen for that matter, had mentioned anything about Lord Devil seeking recompense for solving people’s problems.

In fact, the implication was that the clients incurred no risk whatsoever—

“…”

If that was true, I felt like I’d been out of line—I couldn’t help but conflate Lord Devil’s activities with the image of Mister Oshino demanding five million yen in compensation from my dear senior, or of Deishu Kaiki swindling middle school girls out of their pocket money, and I’d jumped to the conclusion that cash was changing hands here as well.

A free counseling service, a free counselor.

That was just like…

“Like Araragi-senpai.”

“Hm? Did you say something, Kanbaru?”

“No, I didn’t say anything, Numachi□”

I shook my head.

“I definitely had the wrong idea. Sorry about that,” I apologized. “I get it now. In other words, you’re an equal-opportunity ‘do-gooder’ out to help the struggling people of the world as best you can.”

“Heheh. It’s kind of embarrassing to hear it put so plainly□”

“So why call yourself Lord Devil?” My words hadn’t been meant as a compliment, so I felt icky seeing her blush. Which is why I cut in and asked these questions without waiting for her to finish her sentence. “Isn’t it impossible to avoid a certain amount of prejudice being directed your way when you use that name?”

“This is the age of impact. Impact and buzz. First off, if you can’t shake up your clients, no one will notice you. Entertainment, culture, politics, these days unpredictability is priority number one. And however godawfully godless I may be, I’m not so shameless as to call myself Lord God or The Archangel.”

“…”

“More than anything, troubled people are basically caught up in a complex. In that kind of psychological state, rather than looking to exalted beings like angels or even God for help, it’s much easier for them to look to the lowest of the low□to the Devil.”

“…There’s a certain twisted logic to that.”

“You think so? That’s a surprise, coming from someone like you, who stays on the sunny side of the street□or has that injury to your arm warped your humanity a teensy bit?”

“That’s…not how it is.”

Sure, it was something of a symbol of my warped humanity, but my left arm was the effect, not the cause—still, her ability to see through to the heart of things hadn't changed a bit since her days as an active player.

In fact, now that she quit basketball, perhaps her powers of insight were even more honed—and formed the cornerstone of her free counseling service?

…Nope.

It's true that we barely spoke a word while we faced each other on the court back in middle school—but precisely because I had faced her as a player, I think I had some sense of her "character."

Roka Numachi the basketball player.

Is—was—not the kind of person who'd lend an ear to you.

Not the kind of girl to place her powers of insight at other people's service.

Did she change during the past three years?

Change—growth.

And yet…

"I vacillated between Lord Devil and The Fallen Angel at first—The Fallen Angel was hard to pass up, but I was afraid that guys would be put off because it sounded a little too cool. Now I can't imagine having chosen anything other than Lord Devil."

"Why." I couldn't figure it out for myself so I just asked her flat out. "If you're not doing it for money, then why are you doing it?"

"Do I have to explain it to you?" she answered my question with a question of her own.

Realizing that it absolutely wasn't her duty to spell it out for me, I was momentarily at a loss but declared, "You have to."

As firmly as I could.

She opened her eyes wide, taken aback by my demand, before shrugging her shoulders like it was all a joke—every one of her movements was so drawn out that they seemed staged—and smiling.

“Oh well. When someone like you comes looking for Lord Devil just for the hell of it, it’s time to close up shop.”

Too bad, I was really into the name I picked this time around, Numachi added with seeming regret.

“This time? You mean you’ve done this before?”

“Yeah, well—ever since I quit basketball three years ago, one way or another, under one name or another—I’ve been lending an ear to all kinds of people.”

Really.

With Deishu Kaiki in mind yet again, I’d assumed that at most, she’d only begun doing this last year—but it was much more deeply rooted than that.

“I retreat as soon as it seems like I’m going to be exposed. Then I start again. That’s the trick.”

“The trick to what?”

“Longevity?” answered Numachi, cocking her head.

Then she repeated herself.

Slowly.

“When someone like you comes looking for me just for the hell of it, it’s time to close up shop and hit ‘continue’—that’s the path to longevity and perpetual youth. Though it’s more a process of trial and error than a ‘continue.’ They’ve more or less died out, but apparently there used to be tons of video games like that thirty years ago—”

“I didn’t come here just for the hell of it…”

“What else do you call it when someone who doesn’t need counseling visits a counseling service? You came just for the hell of it, and here you are face to face with a devil.”

“…”

When I had no reply, Numachi appeared satisfied and said, “What was your question again? You want to know why I’m doing this? If not for money, then why was that it?”

“Yeah, that’s what I asked you.”

“For the sake of humanity is not why, of course. Your question is based on the deeply biased assumption that I’d never do such philanthropic work, right? Well, let me tell you upfront that you’re absolutely correct. You seem to think highly of my powers of insight, but yours aren’t too shabby, either.”

“Okay, so why?”

“I do it for myself. For the wholesome benefit of yours truly, Roka Numachi. Though you might also say for this left leg,” she divulged, unapologetically but without conceit, and if anything, somewhat coolly. “Listening to people’s stories, their troubles and worries, I assure myself, ‘Thank goodness, there are plenty of people out there at least as unhappy as I am’ that’s the only reason I’ve taken on the mantle of Lord Devil.”

“…”

“Oops, now you think less of me, in no time flat. My, my, so serious. You always were a straight shooter, if you’ll pardon the pun, and that was your appeal as a player. But to your foes on the court, myself included, it was nothing but a weakness to be exploited.”

Having seen me frown at her previous declaration, Numachi didn’t bother to hide her conceit this time and cracked a smile.

“…You’re kidding, right?”

“About what? Yes, everyone did go after your weak point. Are you trying to tell me you never noticed? Or are you going to condemn it as a low thing to do? The statute of limitations is up on that one, so I’d say crying foul and harping on your own fairness at this late date is what runs counter to the spirit of sportsmanship.”

Maybe she meant to draw out my feelings with this provocation—but that’s putting a positive spin on things, and it seems truer to say she was just having a ball teasing me.

Of course, what seems truer isn’t always true.

I took a deep breath, little by little so she wouldn’t notice, and exhaled, “That’s not what I meant. I was asking if you were kidding about preying on people’s misery.”

“Preying on people’s misery—not quite. I don’t recall saying that. All I want is to be able to use their unhappiness as a baseline to tell myself, At least I’m doing better than them. That’s all. I’ll never run again for the rest of my life—but there are lots of other people in this world who’re struggling. Knowing that, I’m just barely able to maintain my psychological balance.”

“Balance—”

That word.

Mister Oshino had used it often.

He, who always adhered to the principle of neutrality.

“In that sense, Kanbaru. Seeing your left arm puts my heart at ease. A top player like you reduced to the same state as me—no, maybe it doesn’t ease my heart. Because, unlike me, you don’t seem to be too upset about your arm.”

“That’s not…”

True, I said.

I don’t know if my denial really got through to her, though, since I’d come to terms with my arm’s condition—as something I’d simply

brought on myself—while she didn't seem to be there yet.

So it was no surprise if, from her standpoint, I seemed carefree.

"Heheh." Numachi smiled. "The letters that I—Lord Devil receives from high school kids, and the recordings I make of their phone calls, are my prized collection. There are unhappy people in this world, there are so many unhappy people in this world—that fact has been my saving grace. Real stories, straight from the horse's mouth. I get so much more into them than I do reading some canned tearjerker of a novel. I've been collecting other people's unhappiness for three years now, hanging out different shingles. It's not about preying on them, Kanbaru, it's about appraising them."

"…Not a particularly laudable hobby, is it?" I probably should have told Numachi how that really made me feel—maybe it was exactly what she wanted, too—yet the words I finally managed to get out had passed through a series of filters, been strained and sugarcoated. "Those people who come to you for help are actually suffering, aren't they?"

"Which is what gives the collection its value—does that sound villainous enough? Heheh, don't get so serious, Kanbaru. You look like you're going to hit me. Don't come any closer, I'm frightened of your intimidating presence."

"You were never this far away when you set a screen."

"I wonder. It's been so long, I've forgotten. After all, I'm not a basketball player anymore. I'm a counselor."

I hit her.

It surprised me, I didn't see myself as the kind of person who could just up and hit someone—but before I knew it, I had definitely slapped her in the face with my right hand.

Though I suppose I must have retained some of my composure, since I didn't slap her with the monstrous strength of my left hand.

Even as her cheek was reddening from the slap, Numachi's face wore a scornful smile that clearly said—

You lose.

“I told you not to get so serious, Kanbaru. I mean, like, check it out,” she invited in a suddenly overfamiliar tone, dropping her hand on my shoulder like we were the best of friends. Casually, cheerfully, she said, “You really think people who come to me for help are actually suffering? People who are wouldn’t turn to any Lord Devil. We’re talking ordinary, everyday unhappiness. Miniscule unhappiness. When someone does occasionally show up with a legitimate problem, I refer them to an appropriate organization□which I already told you, didn’t I?”

“…”

“And it’s not like I stir up their unhappiness, I just listen earnestly to their stories. Earnest, like you were back in your playing days. Who’s hurt by that? I only snicker on the inside, while my expression remains the picture of gravity. When I read their letters, same as when I answer the phone. I regard that as the courtesy due to them for kindly providing me with a supply of unhappiness.”

“The moment you snicker on the inside, you’re being faithless… though I suppose it’s not going to do any good to tell you that.”

“No good at all.”

“So what you’re saying, Numachi□is that, apart from those who are clearly beyond your help, you’re actually solving people’s problems, so they have nothing to complain about.”

Your problems solved, without fail.

That was the word on Lord Devil.

And□Numachi was faithfully doing just that for the people who came to her for advice. Whatever she was feeling on the inside, she was taking care of their unhappiness for them and claiming it for herself.

Her role as a counselor aside, she was faithful in her role as a collector.

That was going to be her assertion.

“Nope,” she said.

Yet it wasn’t so. She was faithless as a collector, too.

“I don’t do anything. I just listen.”

“…Huh?”

“I listen to their stories, and that’s all. For Mode 1, I get their letters, and then do nothing. For Mode 2, I say, ‘Duly noted,’ and that’s the end of it. For the Mode 3 people, I listen to the general outline, and then without waiting to hear the particulars—that is, without actually doing anything—I send them down the conveyor belt to an appropriate organization.”

Because I don’t want to hear any truly unhappy stories. I really don’t, confessed Numachi—sliding her hand down off my shoulder and grabbing my right breast.

It was a rough motion, perfectly described by the word “grab,” with nothing of the loving caress, nothing seductive about it at all.

Quietly and distinctly painful.

In retaliation for the slap, perhaps—which made it hard to brush away her hand.

“Lord Devil just listens. That’s all.”

“Why—”

“What d’you mean, ‘why’? Because sticking your nose into other people’s unhappiness only makes things more complicated. If you really want to help them, you need the backbone to shoulder the full burden of their unhappiness or you’ll get nowhere. Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“No, that’s not what I meant by ‘why’—I already know it’s no use telling you anything. It’s just, if what you say is true, then why is there a rumor that Lord Devil will solve your problems without fail?

You don't actually do anything."

"Oh, come on, everybody knows that time heals all wounds."

Numachi said this with the easy-going air of someone revealing the answer to a trick question for grade school kids.

She still didn't remove her right hand from my breast.

"It's quite literally a matter of time. The truth is that our worries are basically anxiety about the future. The foreboding feeling that things might get even worse is enough to disrupt anyone's psychological balance—so people who come to me just need to hear me say 'I'll take care of it,' not for their problems to be solved."

"…So that's the truth behind your hundred-percent success rate?"

Which essentially meant that Numachi was just "stalling" the people who came to her. Saying, "I'll solve your problem, so just wait awhile"—and thereby liberating her clients from the psychological state called anxiety.

She offered not resolution, but release.

Meanwhile, the underlying problem would fade with time—or become irrelevant to the client, was that it?

"They say simply talking is enough to ease your worries, and—they're absolutely right," she confirmed. "That's the truth, that's the answer. Even though I do nothing, everybody eventually feels better."

"But isn't that just avoiding the issue? Running away? Aren't you just averting your eyes from your clients, and their problems?"

"What's wrong with running away? You can solve almost any problem in the world by running away from it. While you're running and kicking it down the line, the problem stops being a problem—it's only because people want their problems solved 'right away' that they're suffering."

"…"

I was starting to feel like I was being hornswoggled—no, I'm pretty sure I was.

……

No.

Putting it that way still dumped the responsibility onto Numachi—and that was low.

She'd managed to convince me.

Readily.

Yes.

Back then—back when I made a deal with a real devil, if I hadn't faced the problem, if I'd just persevered and hadn't been so desperate to solve it—

I wouldn't have injured anyone.

And leaving aside what she said, and how she said it, it did seem to be true that, as Lord Devil, Roka Numachi had been listening to numerous high school students' complaints and easing their minds.

Which is why the Fire Sisters—the former Fire Sisters, that is, were so hesitant to act.

Those sisters who styled themselves the defenders, the avatars of justice, were fairly powerless in the face of a foe that was "right" in some way.

"…Take your hand off me."

"Hm?"

"I told you to take your hand off my chest."

"Hmph."

I'd expected a little more resistance, but Numachi quickly complied with my demand—she removed her hand from my chest, then

clenched and unclenched her fingers so I could see.

A lazy gesture accompanied by a lazy smile.

“So, what now, Kanbaru?”

“I’m going home.”

Oh? Numachi raised her eyebrows.

She seemed genuinely surprised.

“I thought I’d get at least one more smack from you, but you’re a surprisingly sensible woman. Though I can tell you right now that I’m going to keep on building my collection under another name. This habit of mine seems to have become something of an addiction—and I’m hooked on the hard stuff.”

“I apologize for hitting you earlier. Sorry.”

“Well aren’t you gracious.”

“I don’t approve of what you’re doing, it’s predicated on predilections that I simply can’t wrap my mind around, but it also doesn’t seem like you’re contributing to anyone’s misery. Superficially it almost seems like you’re doing a good deed.”

“I’m glad you get it.”

“I don’t,” I said, putting some distance between us.

And she didn’t try to close it—probably because she had no reason to.

“See you around, Kanbaru. It’s too bad our long-awaited reunion had to be like this. I was really hoping to be reunited on the court, but—I guess that’s an impossible dream now, for the both of us. Life’s a bitch.”

“Time takes care of that as well, though, doesn’t it.”

“Of course,” she agreed straightaway.

Without reiterating my farewell, I turned my back on her and walked away at a brisk pace, leaving her alone in the burnt field where the ruins of the cram school had once stood.

The truth is I wanted to run, but for some reason I couldn't—and it wasn't out of consideration for Numachi and her injured leg.

At any rate, I felt better.

I'd discovered the identity of Lord Devil, and it wasn't me—just having confirmed that was enough.

…I'd probably go on repeating these pointless errands for the rest of my life. Forever gripped by paranoia that I might have perpetrated every single incident in the world.

I'd doubt myself and feel remorseful ad nauseum.

That would be my way of taking responsibility for my past mistakes—my manifest punishment.

This time the culprit hadn't been me, but in a surprising turn, an old acquaintance—and though I couldn't comprehend her mindset, I nevertheless thought that the person waiting for me in that burnt field could just as well have been me.

Every morning when I read the paper and saw the names of the perpetrators apprehended the previous day—I identified with them, even though I didn't know them at all.

And I'd keep doing that.

For the rest of my life.

Forever.

…Or could time take care of that for me, too? Might the day finally come where I skim the newspaper like a normal person, and hear a rumor without pricking up my ears?

And at night.

Would the time come for me to sleep without binding my left arm with duct tape?

Probably not.

In that sense, Numachi, who'd been keeping up her Lord Devil act, or something like it, for almost three years running, was no different. Her leg injury ending her athletic career had been a shock, and she boasted about collecting tales of others' misfortunes to ease that shock, but by her own logic, wouldn't time take care of her "worries" as well?

Even if she didn't gather such tales

Or would that take more than just three years?

Would her worries go on forever as well, recurring throughout her life?

"…Well, whatever."

The fact that my old archrival was up to her elbows in some pretty weird stuff left me with some complicated feelings that I couldn't really put into words, but at the same time, there was nothing I could do about it.

Archrival she may have been, but if circumstances hadn't brought us together in such a manner, I could easily have passed her by on the street without noticing.

Even so.

Even so, wouldn't Araragi-senpai stick his nose into what she was up to?

Maybe not.

It suddenly occurred to me that I should text him. If I explained everything in detail, he might stick his whole head in, not just his nose, so of course I withheld key points and was curt:

An old acquaintance of mine (female) fondled my boob.

Ordinarily, he didn't respond to texts all that promptly, but just this once I got a reply right away:

Count me in!

"…"

Smiling, I turned off my phone.

010

After relating the above events at great length, this might seem like a chabudai-gaeshi, or flipping over a set table, but the fact is that this kind of thing wasn't all that uncommon in my life. In fact, it happened all the time.

I catch the ghost of a whisper about something and go check it out, full of anxiety, only for my delusions of culpability to come to nothing—as I said, I was doing this over and over again since the previous year.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. Endlessly.

Well, it's just that it got worse last year, when I started acting on it, while the thoughts themselves were a fixture ever since elementary school—ever since I made my deal with a devil.

Like when I thought it was my fault that the cram school went out of business.

I'd stalked Araragi-senpai for more or less the same reason, and I'll be the first to admit that the whole thing bordered on the pathological, but on the other hand we can say, though we'd be stretching things a little, that such abnormal behavior was routine work to which Suruga Kanbaru became accustomed.

We can.

Once you get used to it, the abnormal can be normal, is normal.

Eccentricities inevitably go into fashioning the everyday.

So while my reunion with Roka Numachi in the middle of that burnt field was of course unexpected—while being suddenly confronted by an old acquaintance whom I'd never expected to see again, my middle school arch-nemesis no less, was in its own way

something of a shock—I was surprised, and that was all.

Retired players are forgotten. I'd forgotten about her until I saw her again, and she must have forgotten about me.

The passage of time is a strange thing, our ties to others are funny things—those banal thoughts ran through my head, but they're available to anyone who picks up an old novel; as the fruits of personal experience, they're not even worth mentioning.

Life is overflowing with surprises of that caliber.

If I sound cold, that's probably because I am, but I can't hide my true feelings about it—it's like Numachi said, I've never been able to approach things any way but straight on. If I got emotionally invested at every turn like my seniors Araragi and Senjogahara, my body would give out. Or rather, my mind would.

I might come across as a reckless and foolhardy hothead to Araragi-senpai, but some people see me as cool and dispassionate.

As for how I see myself—no, we'll leave that alone for now.

Taking it in that direction would open up a real can of worms.

Anyway, that's all my reunion with Roka Numachi was for me. Even if I belonged to this new Twitter thing I've been hearing about, it wasn't an event that would have made me tweet.

I wouldn't have tweeted anything.

Normally.

Since I say normally, you know that's not how things actually turned out. In reality, the name of my middle school arch-nemesis, Roka Numachi, would soon become impossible for me to forget.

Impossible to forget?

Judging from my unconscious use of that phrase, I guess that somewhere deep inside I intensely want to forget about her—but let's move on to the following day.

My second day as a third-year high school student.

On the morning of the second day of my new life that new term I woke up at the same time as always.

“A brooding frown makes people think you’re wise, but they’re dead wrong. Thinking about things isn’t always good. It’s the ones who don’t think about anything and just blithely float through life who tend to hold the world in the palms of their hands. Worrying is just a waste of time. If you have the time to think, then act. Forget your worries. No use crying over spilt milk.”

That was what my mother said to me in my dream that morning she appeared in my dreams often enough, but as I got out of bed I thought to myself that it had been quite a while since she’d shown up two days running.

That is, I tried to get out of bed, but my left arm, still fixed to a post with duct tape, held me back.

“…Nnng.”

Absently, I stripped away the tape and as I was stripping it away, I came fully awake. The work of freeing myself from this wrapping was like my version of morning calisthenics.

Same wake-up routine as always.

Same as always. That’s what I thought.

As my vision came into focus, I spotted my nail clippers the ones I’d searched for so thoroughly the day before but had never found.

On second thought, I hadn’t searched all that thoroughly but, that’s always how it goes: you can’t find what you’re looking for no matter how hard you search, but as soon as you give up, there it is.

I finished removing the duct tape, and kept on going, unwrapping the bandage from my left arm. If I didn’t cut my nails right when I found the clippers, I’d lose sight of them again. And yesterday’s plan to stop and buy new ones at the convenience store had been derailed by Ogi’s intrusion.

I felt like I'd come out a little bit ahead, finding the old ones like this. I might treat Ogi to a can of juice with the money I'd saved, but it might not be a good idea to spoil such a cheeky junior□with trivial thoughts running through my head, I cut the nails on my left hand.

Thumb, pointer finger, middle finger.

I got that far□and only when I had just the ring finger and pinky left to go did I belatedly notice.

Very fucking belatedly.

But there was no helping it.

Because it was the way it was supposed to be□in fact, the way it was up until the day before was what was unnatural, however accustomed to it I may have become. So there was no helping the fact that it'd taken me some time to notice.

Yes.

The left arm I had exposed and aired by unwrapping my bandage□wasn't a monkey's.

Nor was it a devil's.

It was the human left arm it was supposed to be again.

011

For a second I thought I might still be dreaming, that I was having one of those “waking up from a dream” dreams, but that wasn’t the case.

“This must be a dream” is pretty much just a comic-book idea, and I’m not so dreamy a girl that I need to go around pinching my cheek□still, at the sight of my smooth, slim left arm.

Not beastly, but human.

I couldn’t help but gasp□and do a double take in disbelief.

I quite literally could not believe my eyes.

In a daze, I stripped naked and looked at myself in the full-length mirror standing in the corner of my room□and in my reflection, regardless of how I posed, my left arm.

My right arm in the reflection was a human’s.

My dear, departed arm□I’d almost forgotten what it was like.

…Come to think of it, there was absolutely no need for me to get completely naked, but that’s just how discombobulated I was.

It was only natural.

The sudden, abrupt, unexpected return of an arm that had been a beast’s ever since last May□the arm that had forced me to retire from the sport of basketball, which I’d played ever since middle school□was not something I could process just like that.

What the hell was going on?

I mean.

I did feel happy, of course.

It's not like I hadn't longed for the day when my arm would return to its proper state—though I'd convinced myself that it was my just deserts, that it was karma, as if I'd accepted it honorably, it had still made me sad to see that beastly arm every time I unwrapped it to change or take a bath.

I'd hidden my arm under a bandage to avoid people's prying eyes—but I'd also been hiding it from my own.

Even when I was alone in my room, even when I went to sleep at night, I undid the bandage as infrequently as possible—so.

So it's not that I wasn't happy.

But bewilderment occupied a vastly higher proportion of my emotional pie chart than happiness.

Why?

Why had my left arm been—liberated?

Today, this day, all of a sudden? Without warning?

By the way, Mister Oshino did say that time would take care of the problem—his expert opinion was that my arm would be freed from the devil when I turned twenty.

Had he just been a little off about the timing?

Had it happened two years early?

Was that within the margin of error?

"…"

But, but, could things really turn out that conveniently? Was it really okay for someone like me, who'd perpetrated something so dire, to be blessed with such good fortune?

No, there was one other possibility.

A horrible possibility that I didn't even want to consider.

This arm had become the Monkey's Paw in the first place because I'd petitioned a devil to "get rid of Araragi-senpai" because I hated him with all my being.

The Devil's Arm was the plain and simple embodiment of that hatred and it was because the matter was never resolved, because it ended without my wish being granted, that it got stuck that way.

If my arm changed back that didn't mean something happened to him, did it?

On that day last year.

That time.

The negative wish I had made back then could that unforgivable wish possibly have been fulfilled out there somewhere?

That unthinkable possibility floated into my mind, and the moment it did, I reached for my cell phone where it was plugged into the charger.

I'd left it off since the day before, but now I turned it on in a panic given that I run twenty kilometers every morning, I'm a much earlier riser than most high school students, and, well, at the moment it was more predawn than early morning, but that being said, I had to do it. I had to get in touch with him as soon as possible.

Just as I was running into trouble opening the contacts and finding his name, my phone showed a new message.

A new message.

From my dear senior.

Perfect timing, I thought, but in fact it seemed as though it had been delivered to the server while my phone was off, and I was receiving it only now.

That other message was a joke. How come you didn't answer? Are you pissed? You're not pissed, are you? Well, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean it, let me make it up to you somehow.

……

Pathetic!

If it actually was something worth apologizing for, such a casual message wasn't going to cut it.

Hmm, as far as I could tell from the message, he didn't seem to be in any sort of trouble…

It'd be just like him to meet some hideous fate immediately after sending the message, but at least it seemed like I didn't need to be in a rush to call him.

Or rather, I didn't want to call him.

If I was pissed at all, then it was now.

I mean, come on…

But if nothing bad had happened to him, why had my arm gone back to normal?

It was mysterious□I definitely felt more confused than happy.

Honestly, it was even a little unsettling.

For the chains that bound me night and day to suddenly be undone□was distinctly unsettling.

For this to happen□without a reason.

Didn't Mister Oshino say that every aberration has its reason?

Time heals all wounds.

Is that all this was?

Could I really just go ahead and rejoice, could I just enjoy

it without having to worry, without overthinking it?

But what came to mind.

What popped into my head, was the girl loitering in that burnt field.

My old nemesis, Roka Numachi.

012

Still, I wasn't so carried away as to think that Numachi had miraculously solved my problem with some kind of mystical power in her capacity as Lord Devil.

There was no way that was it.

In the first place, she just listened and didn't actually do anything to solve your problems. And in my case, all I did was go and see her, I never even asked her for help, never said a word about it.

Mystical power my ass.

I was pretty sure Numachi believed my arm's state was the result of an accident during basketball practice.

She didn't know that I was worried, so how could she take care of my worries? I hadn't even talked about it, and I was going to feel better?

The only ones who knew the truth about my arm were my seniors Araragi and Senjogahara and Mister Oshino.

And maybe Hanekawa-senpai and…Ogi? But no one else.

Not even Higasa knew, and she'd been my teammate.

Numachi couldn't have known.

Even on the off chance that she did, there was nothing she could do about it. While the great unhappiness collector might be thrilled to hear me "pity-bragging" though as a fellow basketball player she might actually take offense at the lie there was no way she could make the problem go away.

I understood that.

But even so, even considering that she was what came to mind when I looked at my newly restored arm.

That woman, with her dyed-brown hair and her jersey, and her leisurely movements.

“What do I do now…”

Realizing that I’d been naked the entire time, I quickly put on some clothes. I am still traumatized from the time my grandmother saw me naked in my room.

Even at a time like this, I couldn’t let my routine lapse, and I put on my jogging outfit to go for my morning run.

The one that clearly showed the outline of my body.

It made me tense to put it on.

Liberated, but at the same time, tense.

I collected my hair, quite long now, into a ponytail, and finally, I rewrapped my left arm in a bandage. Since it had returned to human form, there was no longer any reason to hide it underneath a bandage, but having kept it wrapped up for almost a year now under the pretext that I was “injured,” it wouldn’t do to go out without one all of a sudden.

The outline was totally different, but there was nothing I could do and I didn’t realize until after I’d wrapped my arm back up that I’d forgotten to finish cutting my nails, the whole reason I’d unwrapped it in the first place. Too late now.

It’s like the ensorcelled bandage Hiei uses to seal the black dragon such a frivolous idea popping into my head at this juncture made me wonder if I’m stupid, after all. It made me think, yes, I must be stupid.

Numachi said that my earnest playing style was my weak point, which would mean I’m stupid and earnest.

What a clown.

In that sense I'm a lot like Araragi-senpai, who's pathologically incapable of not joking around whatever the situation, and we make for a good match.

I put on my sneakers, went out into the chilly gloom, and started running—gradually upping my pace as I went.

"Gaaah…."

My balance was all off.

No, with my bilateral symmetry restored, it was the right balance, but my left side was suddenly lighter, so the faster I went, the more my body leaned to the side and threatened to fall over.

Which is to say, I did fall over.

I failed to take the corner, and with a plomp—no, too cute, that doesn't do it justice—with something more like a scrush, my left side smote the asphalt.

It hurt. It hurt a lot. It goddamn hurt.

I'd tried to regain my balance and failed.

If I could have gotten my left hand on the ground I probably could have lessened the damage, but I was having difficulty controlling an arm whose size had subtly changed (back), and my reflexes swung and missed.

"Ow, ow, ow…ow."

When I looked, I saw that the powerful friction with the asphalt had torn the bandage, and my left arm, which had only just returned to normal, was all scraped up and bleeding. It was the first time in a long time that I'd fallen while running, and getting scraped up was refreshing.

I felt as though I'd dropped a brand-new cell phone on the ground and given it a nasty scratch the day I got it—in other words, I was really able to feel that this was my own arm.

This, was my own arm.

With blood, nerves, feeling.

My left arm.

My left arm□that always handled the basketball, that always supported me.

“Ow, ow… Haha, ouch, ouch□ahahaha.”

It was not just due to any masochistic tendencies I might have that I burst out laughing as I sat there on the ground where I’d fallen cradling my hurt left arm with my whole body.

Because I was also crying.

Because holding my recently returned left arm□I was shedding tears like crazy.

“Ahahaha, haha… Ow, ow… Haha, ouch□ouch, ow…”

I’m so happy.

That’s what I said.

Oh, dammit.

All that rhetoric about being more bewildered than happy, about discomfort overshadowing joy, that was all a pose.

The hell with reasons.

I was just happy.

It was the only thing I felt then.

013

Someone called the police on me.

Given that I was laughing loudly and crying at the same time in the middle of the street, that was only natural.

I explained the situation to the officer who rushed to the scene—though I couldn't explain what was really going on, of course. When I gave the excuse that I was crying because I fell while I was jogging, but I was laughing at the same time because I was a masochist, the officer looked at me like I was some kind of monster.

"High school kids are so twisted these days… I feel like a dinosaur. I thought Koyomi Araragi was the only high school student like that—now that brings me back. I wonder what that kid is up to these days."

That's the commentary I received.

Yup.

My dear senior was a little too much of a celebrity.

It wasn't like I'd done anything wrong, and the scrape on my arm wasn't all that bad, so the officer didn't bring me in for questioning and instead was nice enough to give me a ride home in a patrol car.

It was my first time riding in one.

What do they call them, mini patrol cars?

Not being able to finish my jog felt a bit like having indigestion, but I wasn't going to shake off a police officer who'd arrived at the scene to keep going, so I sadly had no choice but to end the morning's exercise there.

I thanked the officer for the ride and went back to my room. My grandfather, who was out watering the plants in the garden, was surprised by the patrol car stopping in front of the house, but I'd explain that later—returning to my room, I dug out my first-aid kit, carefully disinfected my scrape, and applied a band-aid.

The band-aid I applied was a brand-new type that integrates into the wound (what on earth will science think of next?), and over it I wrapped a new bandage—though it felt like maybe I was overdoing it for such a minor injury.

Then I ate breakfast as always.

As always, I checked the morning paper and the TV news and cleared myself of all the false charges that hadn't been brought against me.

Not having worked up a sweat, I didn't shower but soon headed to school as always.

This at least remained unchanged, for the moment—whatever the status of my arm.

"Oh dear, did something bad happen to you?"

On the way to school—Ogi came up beside me just like the day before and asked that totally misguided question. Did the kid lie in wait for me or something?

Was he a remnant of that mysterious organization that got forcibly disbanded (destroyed) by Araragi-senpai at the end of last year, the unofficial Suruga Kanbaru fanclub Kanbaru Seule?

If so.

Then he was really ill-mannered.

Did something bad happen to you?

He claims to be Mister Oshino's nephew, then says the exact opposite thing?

What the hell?

“Huh,” he grunted. “But this is a first. Seeing you walk, I mean. Are you okay? Did you hurt your leg or something?”

“I did nothing of the sort.”

“On your period, then?”

“…You’re more inappropriate than ill-mannered, aren’t you.”

“Shoot. I’m supposed to be a boy right now.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing, just talking to myself.” With the confounding statement, That came out wrong, in both senses, Ogi came around, pulled a U-turn in front of me, and began riding backwards on his bike like the day before.

I’d checked with Higasa the day before because it had been bothering me, and apparently there are BTM bikes for doing tricks that are designed to move in reverse when you pedal backwards, like a unicycle□Ogi’s was definitely a granny bike but it must have the same design.

In any case it was obviously dangerous and anxiety-provokingly unstable.

“So, why are you walking? You, Suruga Kanbaru, the veritable reincarnation of Hermes?”

“Well…”

Reincarnation of Hermes? Who could be going around saying such things if not Araragi-senpai?

He’s always applying odd epithets to the people he knows.

I was hesitant to reveal the true state of affairs to Ogi, that with my arm back to normal, my balance was all thrown off□or rather that my balance had gone back to normal, and until I got used to it I

would fall over if I ran.

It wasn't like I didn't want to tell someone about it, overjoyed as I was—and Ogi knew about my arm, if only indirectly, so it wouldn't actually be a problem to tell him, but—

I somehow hated the idea of Ogi being the first person I told.

That was how I felt.

If possible, I wanted the first person I told to be one of my two dear seniors—or ideally, both at the same time.

And so I lied.

"I feel a little feverish. I guess maybe it was too early in the season to start sleeping naked."

"…I'm a boy, you know."

"Oh. But then, I can't imagine you taking any interest in me being in the nude."

"Uh-uh, you're wrong. I'm interested in all girls provided they're naked. There are no bad apples among naked girls."

"Have fun with the gold diggers."

Appalled, that was all I could muster.

Apparently, however, I succeeded in fooling him. The seemingly rebellious but surprisingly obedient Ogi seemed to have bought my lie hook, line, and sinker. He said, "But if you keep blithely strolling along at this pace, you'll end up being late."

"You're right."

He was right.

I was walking at a fairly brisk pace, and if I went any faster, I'd fall over.

First period was homeroom and they were just going over the

syllabus, so I was heading to school with the mindset that, worst-case scenario, it wouldn't really matter if I were late…

"Hop on the back if you like. We can ride double."

"No way, that's too raunchy."

"Riding double is? Where on earth did you get such a half-assed idea?"

"…"

From Araragi-senpai.

Of course.

"I hate the word 'ass.' It's vulgar," I objected. "Half-assed, half-assed… Where does the rest of the ass go?"

"At the rate you're halving it, there won't be any ass left at all… If you want, you can be the one to pedal."

"Are you asking a lady in poor health to pedal your damn bicycle? You really don't think things through, do you?"

Forget about me, just go on ahead, I urged like a character from a boys' manga, and waved him on.

As if I was driving him off.

But he paid me no mind and continued the conversation: "Speaking of!"

Ogi made me strongly aware of the advantages of not picking up on social cues□though I'm generally terrible at it myself.

From now on I'd prefer all social cues to have subtitles.

"It's about our conversation yesterday regarding Lord Devil," he said. "Do you remember?"

"Hm? Nope, I forget. Remind me?"

“You’re awful. You should pay attention when people talk to you. I’m talking about Lord Devil, who solves your problems without fail,” he complained, pursing his lips with obvious dissatisfaction. Then he continued with this line: “They say she’s disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Yes. I wonder if Lord Devil has gone back to hell—wait, is hell where devils hang out? Or is that demons? Am I just getting tripped up by the translation? Either way, last night a notice started going around that she wasn’t accepting any more cases. It was conscientious of her to issue a going-out-of-business announcement, I suppose—I wonder if all devils are like that?”

“…”

Did Numachi really decide to call it a day? Because she was found out by someone who was neither a client nor seeking help, but a third party, by me—“just for the hell of it”?

…Of course, she likely had no intention of actually putting an end to it all; closing up shop was just the precursor to her next undertaking—I imagine the reason she so conscientiously issued a going-out-of-business announcement was so as not to create competition with her subsequent “unhappiness collection venture.”

It hadn’t been my intention to tell her what to do, and even if she’d taken it that way, I didn’t believe for a second that she was the sort to be deterred.

Hmm.

I’d really put my foot in it.

This was problematic.

Now that she’d gone to ground, it’d be much harder to get ahold of her—she’d beat an impressively hasty retreat for someone whose movements were so sluggish. And just when I was on the point of finding Karen after school and getting her to tell me the current meeting place for Hard Mode so I could go and see Numachi again.

My arm going back to normal.

At that moment it was my conjecture, based on my own arbitrary judgment, that it was connected in some way to my meeting with Numachi, but□

Happiness was happiness.

I couldn't disguise it.

I wasn't going to lie about it.

Even though I'd brought it on myself, I was still happy to be freed□maybe I shouldn't have rejoiced, but I genuinely did.

That didn't change the fact that I wanted to know why, though.

I had to know why I'd been granted clemency by the gods□by the devil.

And I felt sure that seeing Numachi again was the best way to begin my investigation□well, even if she'd given up being Lord Devil, there had to be some other method.

Maybe I should have exchanged email addresses and cell numbers with her the previous day, but it wasn't really that kind of situation, plus I hadn't expected to see her again, so it's only natural that we didn't□but I knew her name and the middle school she'd attended, so it wouldn't be that hard to find out where she lived.

"I wonder why she gave it up," Ogi mused. "Lord Devil must have saved so many people."

"People can't save other people."

"That sounds like something my uncle would say□but we're not talking about a person, we're talking about a devil."

"A devil?"

Like they exist, I said, running my hand down the bandage on my left arm.

“Also, you can’t be a human and a devil at the same time. All you are is a devilish human.”

A devilish human.

Or a human devil?

But I’m not directing that at Numachi nor am I directing it at my mother.

When I think it through, it seems to me that a devilish human isn’t someone who’s a bad person, or a sinful person, but the kind who’d turn to a devil for help.

In other words, me.

014

But after that, the pace at which the story unfolded slowed to a crawl, very much in keeping with the way Roka Numachi moved and spoke.

My hope, or rather my overly optimistic evaluation, was that I might be able to learn her whereabouts right off the bat by asking Higasa, who, like Numachi and me, had made a name for herself playing middle school basketball. But when I asked her first thing after I got to school (managing to slip in just under the gun), Higasa said, “Nope, no idea,” and shook her head. “Numachi, right? Famous for bogging players down with her Quagmire Defense and nicknamed the Poison Swamp□Roka Numachi?”

“People called her that…”

“They called you Godspeed Angel, by the way.”

“…”

Even the one I’d come up with, Li’l Suruga Can-do, was cooler.

Woof, now that’s embarrassing.

“By the way again, I was Sunshine Umbrella.”

“Why was only your name in English?”

“Hey, I was just the captain of a minor team. You two were in a different class. Or maybe even a different phylum.”

“Minor? You’re being more sarcastic than modest. A dark horse, that’s what you were.”

“Anyway, I have no idea□from what I hear, she transferred out of that powerhouse middle school soon after she quit basketball.”

“Really?”

“Yup. I remember because it made a big impression on me. It seems she’d been getting a tuition waver thanks to her sports scholarship—which she lost when she got injured, so she couldn’t afford to go there anymore.”

“…She wasn’t just forced to retire, she had to change schools too?”

What could I say—it was a hopelessly pitiful tale.

I recalled her crutch.

Then, her injury had taken away everything she had.

“Actually, it seems that even with her injury, there was still hope that she could stay on. It’s a legit school, after all. I’m sure she could’ve avoided transferring if she’d gone about it right, but I guess her pride wouldn’t allow it.”

“Her pride… She didn’t really seem the type, though.”

“Who doesn’t have any pride?” Higasa said, rather emphatically.That was very much like her—no, it was more that even though I wasn’t Ogi, my words had come out wrong.

If anything, my statement was lacking in pride.

“I heard that she and her family moved away when she transferred, so yeah, I don’t think she’s still around,” Higasa told me.

“Not around—”

That wasn’t true.

In fact I’d seen her the day before—it was probably true that Numachi had moved, but she must have moved to this town from wherever she’d been living.

She’d been right under my nose—yet I wouldn’t have recognized her as that Numachi even if we’d passed each other on the street.

With her dyed-brown hair, and that baggy jersey no athlete would wear.

Having undergone such a total transformation—even Higasa, who was telling me all this stuff about Numachi, wouldn't have known it was her.

Not that I'm one to talk.

If she hadn't called my name first—I doubt I would have been sure that she was that Numachi—that she was the Poison Swamp.

What a strange relationship we had.

Even as we crossed swords on a narrow court, even as our rivalry played out as something very like a life-or-death struggle—we knew essentially nothing about each other.

If we hadn't ended up on the same team in high school, it would have been the same with Higasa. I never would have known which girls' comics she liked, nor that she thought of herself as shy, and ultimately I would have forgotten about her as well.

"Ties that bind," I sighed.

"Hm?"

"Nothing—so in other words, Numachi's current whereabouts are unknown."

"Yeah. Though putting it that way sounds a little overblown. If you absolutely need to know, I can contact an old acquaintance of mine who might be able to put me in touch with a former teammate of Numachi's, but… Their school is a combined junior and senior high athletic prep school, so a student who retired due to injury is sort of a taboo subject. I wonder if they'll tell me…"

"That's okay, thanks anyway. You don't need to go that far. It's no big deal, I was just reading a novel yesterday and there was a character with the same surname, so all of a sudden she popped into my head."

“Huh. Sub? Dom?”

“Don’t go assuming it’s a boys’ love novel.”

Anyway, it’s really nothing, I said, and Higasa seemed satisfied since it was only idle gossip to her.

But the same wasn’t true for me.

Not wanting to get my friend caught up in something that involved an aberration, I ended the conversation, but this made things tricky.

I didn’t know what to do or no, I knew exactly what to do. It’d be best if I gave it up.

I’d made an effort to see Numachi again, but it hadn’t happened, end of story.

Nice try, good hustle.

I could let it go at that no one was in dire straits because I couldn’t find her.

Let me repeat that I had no idea whether or not seeing Numachi and the restoration of my arm bore any causal relationship. It was a wild guess. If your mother were to break her back, it might have nothing to do with the crack you stepped on earlier in the day maybe it was just pure coincidence that I’d run into my old nemesis the day before my arm returned to normal.

Forget “maybe,” the chances were extremely good.

That kind of coincidence is perfectly plausible.

And so I could let it go at that.

I could say “and they all lived happily ever after” and end the story.

The lingering reservations, the feeling that things were still somehow up in the air surely time would take care of all that.

“…Ugh.”

But I couldn’t do it.

Even though I’d retired a long time ago, as someone who’d given her life to basketball, it was beaten into the very marrow of my bones that you can’t win if you don’t play.

So I couldn’t give up.

There was no excuse for giving up.

I had to see Roka Numachi.

A week went by.

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One week later—on Sunday, to be precise, five days after the Tuesday when I found out that Numachi had gone missing, I got on the train and left my town for the first time in ages.

I was going to an open campus at the local college—it wasn't the school I hoped to attend, but Higasa was dragging me along with her. It wasn't the school she hoped to attend either, but this was "a dress rehearsal for going to an open campus at her dream school," which sounded like rehearsing for a rehearsal, a calculated move very typical of the cautious Higasa.

For me, well, the road ahead wasn't as clear, but I assumed I'd end up going to college, so saying that Higasa was dragging me along makes me sound more unenthusiastic than I was. It gave me the chance to simply enjoy an alien space known as a college.

Even though it wasn't the school I hoped to attend, experiencing that kind of place and seeing it with my own eyes did bring home that I was studying for entrance exams.

Around this time next year.

What in the world will I be doing?

…Up until recently, I couldn't picture that kind of future—but now that my arm was back to normal, I might even spend the next four years of my youth as a basketball player.

My comeback was a realistic reality.

There was always the concern that my arm returning to human form might just be a temporary phenomenon, and that tomorrow or the next day it might revert to a monkey's paw, but after five days there was no sign of that happening.

Having been restored without warning, it wouldn't be at all strange if it became a monkey's paw again without warning, so I couldn't afford to let my guard down—not that there was any way for me to be vigilant or negligent—but for the moment, it seemed like I could let myself believe that my arm had in fact become "human" again.

So there they were.

There before me—choices.

Options.

Whether the road would be easy, normal, or hard—or boast an even higher difficulty level, who could say? In any case, a path to a place I thought had been closed off forever appeared before me.

I thought it only stretched behind me.

Now it appeared before me.

All that remained was to decide whether or not to take it.

There wasn't much time left—but before I could make my decision, there was something I had to take care of.

Roka Numachi.

I needed to be clear on her role—if I discovered that she had nothing to do with it, that'd be fine.

Until I settled the matter, I absolutely couldn't report it to my dear seniors.

Still, there was a limit to keeping Araragi-senpai off the scent with pervy texts.

There was a limit to keeping our pervy conversation limited.

In various senses.

Keeping secrets from my savior was exacerbating my feelings of guilt.

Nevertheless during the past five days.

I'd exhausted every means at my disposal and yet found no clue to help me get to Numachi.

How could it be?

I mean, her jersey aside, it was impossible that there was no information about a girl with such conspicuous hair.

Bleached to that unnatural brown.

In a way, it should have been easier than finding Shinobu, with her natural blond hair but the fact remained that I couldn't.

It was as though when she gave up being Lord Devil, she exited the world altogether.

It was like trying to grasp a cloud no, grasping a cloud might have been easier.

It was yuckier, like trying to grasp a bug, and that should have made me draw back my hand, but I didn't know when to quit.

I could always go to Karen for info, but only as a last resort. Not that I thought she'd tell her brother that I was asking questions but making her promise not to would be odd, and furthermore, I had some qualms about enlisting a defender of justice like her in dealing with Numachi, who hadn't actually committed any "evil deeds."

Hmm, when I put it that way, defending "justice" is such a quandary. I mean, most people aren't particularly offended by evil.

At this rate, though, the last resort was becoming my only option…

"It's your job to impose on people. Anyone who doesn't impose on others is just plain creepy."

My mother's words, which I recalled at crucial moments, seemed pregnant with meaning but never really served.

They seemed like nothing but twisted self-affirmations.

She was the one who entrusted me with the Monkey's Paw, with the Devil's Hand, in the first place, but why did she do it?

She told me not to ask (I think).

Did she really think it wouldn't cast a pall over her child's life? Did she really believe it wouldn't warp me?

Look, I don't mean to blame my mother about my left arm—even now I believe that the responsibility for having turned to a devil lies squarely with me.

I don't know.

I seriously don't know.

What that person was thinking when she entrusted the "hand" to me, when she bequeathed me her hopeless inheritance.

Nor did I know where the arm had gone—when I used the "hand" in elementary school, it was back inside its box the day after my wish was granted.

This time, when I managed to dig out the box—it was empty.

In which case, where the hell did the devil—

"At last we meet, Gaen's legacy."

When we were done with the open campus, Higasa and I convened a meeting at a fast food restaurant and discussed our impressions of the day, then parted ways at the station—she was returning to town by train, while I was going to run—directly after which.

I was addressed thus by an ominous-looking man.

"Ominous" was, what, just the impression he gave; there was nothing specific, but I'm confident that he is perfectly summed up by that word.

A funerary suit.

A beard, his hair slicked back, shadowy eyes behind silver-rimmed glasses.

His appearance was darkness itself.

I'd never actually met him and knew about him only secondhand through Araragi-senpai—and I'd only heard anecdotes and never had his appearance described to me—yet I recognized him in an instant.

This man.

This middle-aged man who was suddenly before me, an expert in aberrations who went to college with Mister Oshino, but first and foremost a swindler—

"Deishu…Kaiki."

"Oh?"

Hearing his name come out of my mouth, he raised his eyebrows in apparent surprise—but if that was how he felt, the expression was all too moderate.

Not much different from a blink.

"You know who I am—I see, you must have heard about me from Araragi or Senjogahara. That'll speed things up. It saves me the trouble of introducing myself. How fortunate. The lesson for me to take home from this is that you can never predict where and how your ties will come in handy."

"…"

I drew in a breath—then turned my back on him and began to walk away.

"Whoa there, hold on now, Gaen's legacy. I've been waiting for you—"

"……nkk!"

As he spoke, I sensed him moving to put his hand on my shoulder,

and broke into a run. I was wearing running shoes, naturally. I hit my top speed with the first step, rocketing out of the gate fast enough to gouge holes in the ground.

It had been five days already since my arm had returned to normal.

Almost a week.

Plenty of time to get used to my fully restored bilateral balance.

Without so much as a glance over my shoulder, I took matters into my own hands (feet) and strove to make a clean getaway from Kaiki□

“Don’t take off running like that. It’s dangerous.”

“……nkk?!”

I hadn’t gotten away.

Which is to say, he overtook me.

In his snug-fitting suit, his leather shoes kicking up a terrible racket, the man passed me on the left with incredible speed, cut around in front of me, and spread his arms like a roadblock.

“Guh…”

I reversed my momentum with enough torque to tear my Achilles tendon, thinking that this time, this time, I would leave him in the dust.

I was absolutely sure I would leave Kaiki in the dust.

I must have unconsciously gone easy on him, but my running speed was my absolute identity, my raison d’être, and my one defining character trait. Getting outpaced by an ominous man who looked like he’d never exercised in his life was exactly□

“You’re not on a track, so don’t take off like that or you’ll stumble and fall. Quite the little tomboy, aren’t you? Be careful.”

□Was exactly what happened.

It was Kaiki in a low stance who left me in the dust like it was nothing, and as before he set himself in my path like a roadblock.

"…"

I didn't have it in me to reverse direction again.

Having cranked my motor too high, severe pain was shooting through my thighs, and even if that weren't the case, I could only stop.

No way…

No way in hell…

My legs, which had undergone training that was beyond rigorous since grade school, utterly surpassed by…a humanities type.

I couldn't chalk it up to it being a long-distance run or anything; he'd passed me in a matter of seconds, so it was nothing but a short-distance contest.

I'd lost in a sprint.

It was a massive shock, and I literally crumpled to the ground.

"Whoa there, you're a confusing kid. Do you normally prostrate yourself when you're chased by a guy and fail to escape? Do I really look so villainous? Maybe I do, at that."

"…"

I lacked the energy to rebut Kaiki's words, which were delivered in an extremely earnest and not particularly mocking tone.

Was this going to be bad?

The first wish I'd made on the Monkey's Paw was "to be able to run faster," so if anyone proved to be faster than me, did that mean□no, maybe it'd be okay. My left arm was no longer a monkey's arm,

after all□but while that eased my mind a little, it did nothing to mitigate my overwhelming sense of defeat.

I had lost…

To this swindler, of all people…

A con artist who'd broken up Senjogahara-senpai's family and set an aberration on Araragi-senpai's little sister, and who even exerted his malice on Shinobu utterly surpassed me in the one and only arena where I excelled, thrashed me so thoroughly there was no room for excuses…

I felt crushed by my own incompetence.

I was ashamed. I wanted to die.

The world could just go ahead and end…

"Tsk, what are we going to do with you. Are you really Gaen's legacy?"

Sounding pained at the sight of me staring despondently at the ground, Kaiki grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and pulled me to my feet like he was picking up a cat, or raising an anchor.

Being subjected to my foe's compassion made me want to disappear all the more.

I wanted to cry.

If I went ahead and bawled now, though, my sob-fest five days earlier would become a lie, so I mustered my last reserves and held back my tears.

"What's your problem? You're making a hell of a face." Kaiki, who apparently hadn't had compassion in mind nor any intention of treating me kindly, readily let go of my neck with those harsh words and threatened, "Don't try to run away. Like I said before, we've met at last. Being as how Araragi and Senjogahara have run me out of your town□I've been waiting here ever since last summer for you to leave."

“Waiting…for me?”

“Yes. Though I’m lying, of course.”

With this swindler-like pronouncement, he started walking. It’s not like he’s grabbing my arm, he isn’t even looking in my direction, so this time I can run away if I want—even yours truly isn’t that optimistic, and didn’t think so.

In fact, it was because he was absolutely convinced that if I took off running he could catch up and cut me off that he could take his eyes off me without restraining me.

That was how big the discrepancy was.

Between his legs and mine.

I didn’t want to admit it, but that was the fact of the matter.

“What’s wrong with you? Come on.”

“Araragi-senpai told me that if I ever saw you, I should run away without speaking a word.”

“Ah, that’s why you suddenly took off—such a kind senpai you’ve got. But I’d say it was unkind not to advise what to do if you couldn’t get away. The lesson you should take home from this is that some things can’t be solved just by running away.”

“…”

Some things can’t be solved—just by running away.

Time.

Does not heal all wounds.

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of deceiving you, or of using you. And of course I have no intention of doing anything unseemly to a high school girl. I just need to talk to you, Gaen’s legacy. Here in front of this busy station wouldn’t do, though, and I want to invite you to a coffee shop—it’s ordinarily unthinkable for me come hell or

high water, but I'm making an exception just for today, and just for you, and will even treat you to a tea."

Treat me to a tea.

From what I'd heard, he wasn't lying—I understood exactly how rare and unprecedented a concession it was for this man.

"…Fine, I'll come. Happy?" I assented reluctantly.

It was terribly humiliating, but I had no choice.

If I didn't go, my loss would stand—and I hate to let a loss stand.

Even though I seemingly couldn't match him in speed—there was no way I could head home without giving this swindler some kind of payback.

I wouldn't be able to face my dear seniors otherwise—and there was something else. He had said "Gaen."

He had called me "Gaen's legacy."

Gaen was my mother's maiden name.

In other words—the man knew my mother.

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This may speak to how basic my personality is, but a part of me can't help unconditionally respecting someone who's a fast runner.

Clearly I place a lot of value on speed, but I also know that in reality that's not how it works—being fast or slow has nothing whatever to do with your personality. Of course I know this, but I feel, I can't help but feel, that anyone who's "a fast runner" probably isn't a bad person.

Let me be clear, I understand perfectly well that it's no reason to put faith in anybody's character. I'm not stupid. Well, I am, but I get it—it's just that we never cast aside all of our childish pieties.

So while I resented Kaiki for overtaking me not once but twice, and wanted revenge—I also admit that his victory softened my stance enough that I was at least willing to hear what he had to say.

It did pain me a little—no, a lot—to think that I might be betraying my dear seniors…

The place Kaiki took me to was in fact a Korean barbecue joint, and not a coffee shop at all. It had such a high-class atmosphere, though, that the catchall "barbecue joint" fell short. There has to be a more appropriate term, and who knows, maybe "coffee shop" was meant to hint at that, but lacking the vocabulary, I can only call it a barbecue joint.

"I have a reservation under Kaiki," the man announced upon passing through the curtains.

He had a reservation.

Since when?

This was all arranged a little too neatly for my taste.

We were reverently shown into a private room (private room?!) that had been prepared for us, and I was even put in the seat of honor. Hang on, when did Suruga Kanbaru become some kind of princess? I was thoroughly perplexed.

Araragi-senpai labeled me a rich kid, but all it meant was that I could buy whatever I wanted, and it was my grandma and grandpa who were the ones with the money; I never felt like anything but a regular high school student.

So being in this restaurant, with its unfamiliar atmosphere, made me antsy.

Dammit, offering me tea and treating me to meat, what's more at some fancy barbecue place where the bibs are made of cloth instead of paper, this guy's up to something, he's a swindler just like I've heard□I tried to rile myself up like that but also knew I was being kind of unreasonable.

"Come on, eat up. Have some meat. No reason to order veggies at a barbecue place. If that's what you want, get thee to a grocer. And leave the grilling to me."

Even as he spoke, Kaiki wielded a pair of tongs to pick up, and ferry to the brazier, the slices of meat that had been served. Rather than actually grilling them, he just seared the outside a little, exposing them to heat for only the briefest moment.

I guess he liked it rare?

Well, at such a fancy place, the meat was of a quality where you could even have it raw…

True to his word, he ordered neither lettuce nor kimchi, and in fact the only thing he ordered other than meat was a medium rice.

He gave the not-particularly-winning impression of being a control freak, the Grill Master, but it actually wasn't all that unpleasant.

No harm done.

In fact it could be seen as generous□he was an adult minding a

minor who was flustered at being in an unfamiliar restaurant. I even thought: He's sticking with oolong tea for my sake when he'd rather be having beer with his barbecue.

Shit.

How could I see him as a good guy?

"Eat meat while you're young. Eating meat makes people happy, Gaen's legacy. Old or young, the worries never cease, but eating delicious meat takes care of all worries."

"…"

Quit it.

Stop being nice.

You're my dear seniors' archenemy□so stop saying things that make it hard for me to hate you.

But thinking so didn't actually make a whole lot of sense. Sure, he sounded preachy, but really all he was doing was trying to get me to eat some meat. And his words seemed to gently caress the surface of what I'd been dealing with.

There was no reason to be spiteful; hell, I should thank him.

But it wouldn't do for me to thank my savior's bitter enemy, so I spat out, "Quit calling me weird names like 'Gaen's legacy'" with all the venom I could muster, in full faultfinding mode.

"Hmph, I see. You're right. But calling you 'Kanbaru' really chaps my hide□that name has nothing to do with Gaen. But are you sure? Because I'd have to call you Suruga."

"…It's better than Gaen's legacy."

"Ah, how casual high school girls are these days. You'd let a man you've never met before call you by your first name. Well then, Suruga. Eat up, quickly now. There's no victory in cold meat."

Did a barbecue meal need winners and losers? When that thought got tangled up with the realization that I'd ended up requesting to be called by my first name like a little hussy, my feelings became even more preternaturally jumbled.

But I couldn't just sit there and watch the meat Kaiki had put on my plate get cold.

The meat had done nothing wrong.

Hate the sin, love the dinner.

Itadakimasu, I said formally, and picking up the chopsticks with my right hand, began to eat. I thought in the back of my mind that I should text my grandma if I got the chance to tell her I wouldn't be needing dinner.

"What's this? You're right-handed? Gaen was left-handed—no, is it because of your injury that you're using your right hand?"

"…"

I couldn't answer. I had no obligation to answer.

But he'd guessed correctly.

Or only half correctly—my left hand had turned into a monkey's, and it was literally to cover that up that I'd wound the bandage around my arm, so I was only pretending to be injured—and as part of that deception, I was holding the chopsticks with my right hand even though I'm actually left-handed.

I'd gotten used to it in no time, but writing had taken longer. Only recently had I gotten good enough to write as smoothly with my off hand.

My handwriting's always been terrible, though, so "smoothly" doesn't amount to much.

There was no reason to keep using my right hand now that my left had returned to normal…but as long as I kept wearing the bandage, at least, I had no choice but to continue. And who knows, maybe it

had been so long that I'd lost my left-handedness.

"How is it, good? It's good, isn't it."

"…"

"Hey now, not much for courtesy, are you. You're eating meat, don't be so sullen."

"…You won't get any courtesy from me."

"It's not courtesy towards me. I mean towards the meat. Meat is life. Don't forget that what you're eating right now is life."

"…It's delicious."

What else could I say when he held the cow hostage like that?

What a coward, excuse the pun□but then, from what I'd heard, he should have said: The money for that meat came from my wallet. My money, meaning my life. Right now you're eating my life, so wipe that sulky look off your face.

Something along those lines?

But the real Kaiki sitting before me and eating meat, his own expression hardly joyous, didn't utter a single word about money and instead asked me, "Is there some meat you'd like to order?"

He still didn't seem inclined to treat me to anything other than animal flesh, but apart from that, he was acting like an "unsociable but kind uncle."

Give me a break.

Say something reprehensible.

Trash boys' love novels or something.

Proclaim your support for the metropolitan ordinance and censorship.

Otherwise I can't come to terms with this.

My personality isn't complicated enough to keep disliking someone who treats me kindly, and to a delicious meal, after beating me in a head-to-head contest in my field of expertise.

I'm a simple person.

When someone is nice to me, I want to thank them.

"So you're a third-year in high school now□preparing for exams. And you left town to attend an open campus? I can still remember when I was preparing for exams. Not that I ever actually studied for them, of course. Even back then, all I was good at was gaming the system…so I don't have any advice to give you about exam prep."

You don't seem to have much on the ball.

At least eat up so you can study hard.

Now he was really sounding avuncular, and I was the one who finally advanced the conversation. "What do you want?"

The trick to swindling the average patsy is to "make them ask questions," so I was very likely dancing right along to Kaiki's tune, but I simply couldn't take being treated kindly by the man for another second.

"Wasn't there something you wanted to discuss?"

"Ah…yes, well. Now that you mention, there was." The swindler shrugged his shoulders as if he'd forgotten it until I pointed it out. "Though I rather think the matter has already been settled at this point."

"Huh?"

"I imagine you've already figured this out, Suruga, but I knew your mother."

"…"

"Let's see, last August, was it? Didn't you meet someone who was your aunt? Izuko Gaen□"

“No,” I shook my head in response. I was kind of glad to be able to answer Kaiki in the negative, and also felt some self-loathing for being a bit twisted. “That person gave me a different name. It was only after she’d left town that I knew she was a Gaen.”

“Really—how very like her.”

“I figured maybe she just had the same last name…”

Okay.

I see.

That person really was—my mother’s younger sister.

She didn’t resemble her all that much, nor had she hinted at the connection—still, I’d wondered.

“The Gaen clan is full of peculiar women. And among them, Toé Gaen and Izuko Gaen were always exceptionally so—and in such contrast with each other. Izuko and I never saw eye to eye, but… your mother looked out for me.”

“…”

“We stumbled across each other when I was even younger than you—and our relationship continued through my college days. I guess she was something like a tutor to me? She tried desperately to set me on the straight and narrow.”

……

Does that mean that Kaiki and I lived in the same town in Kyushu?

If so, then when I was little.

I might have met him—I fixed my gaze on Kaiki’s face for the first time.

But it didn’t trigger anything.

I’d never seen him before—I was sure of it.

“Gaen asked something of me back then. ‘If anything should happen to me, please watch out for my daughter.’”

“…My mother asked you to do that?”

It was a lie.

My intuition told me so.

She’d died along with my father in a car accident—unexpectedly, in other words. She couldn’t have foreseen her death like that.

And why would she ask Kaiki—I mean, even if he hadn’t become a swindler yet, to saddle a college student with something so huge—

No.

It didn’t matter if she was dealing with a swindler or a college student, she wasn’t the kind of person to get hung up on such details… Even me, her one and only daughter, she never saw as anything but an independent individual.

She evaluated everyone based solely on their “personality,” regardless of title or standing—which may have been a wonderful thing, but given that she had to live in human society, it was also a little pathological.

In practice, being raised by her was like being cursed—and this ominous swindler before me… Being saddled with that request when he was only a college student, dragged along by it even now, all the way to me.

It was like he was cursed too.

“I dropped out with my buddy in the middle of the term and left home, so I didn’t know what happened after that—Izuko-senpai being who she is, she never revealed her family background to me even though we belonged to the same club in college. It was only recently that I heard Gaen had died. And that her orphaned daughter had been taken in by her paternal grandparents—and when I heard it, I couldn’t believe my ears. She never seemed like a woman who would go and get herself killed… Or is that exactly

why she did?”

“That’s why you came to town last year?”

If so—what did it mean?

He had come to town because of me—in order to check on me—but he pulled a scam on the local middle school girls just for good measure?

“Precisely the opposite. Looking in on you was the part that happened incidentally—Gaen hadn’t given me any money, after all, so I had no reason to do anything on her behalf. I just figured I’d check on you while I was there, that’s all.”

“…”

That was probably true.

But even if it was, it didn’t make me feel any better.

And furthermore, if it was true, then why—was he waiting for me at the station today, why was he treating me to this meal? “Incidentally” just didn’t—

“Were you by any chance sweet on my mother?”

“Hm? Hmph, so that’s what the kid thinks. Everything always has to be about love.” Kaiki didn’t sound all that offended by my frank question despite his reply. “You’re so simple it’s disgusting. If that’s how you think, you’re going to be easy prey for the swindlers of the world.”

“But you keep calling her Gaen. According to what you said, her last name should have been Kanbaru by the time you met her,” I bluffed with everything I had. In the hopes of landing a retaliatory blow. “Isn’t that because you don’t want to accept that she was married? Since Kanbaru was the name of your rival in love—”

“Cut the shit. But I suppose I must commend you on your powers of insight. At your level, though, your head is liable to end up crowded with superfluous nonsense, and you’ll be even easier to

dupe won't you."

"…"

"But you're more or less on point. Yes, it was a lifetime ago, but I was head over heels for your mother."

He admitted it readily, unambiguously.

A little too unambiguously and a little too readily it didn't feel like I'd struck much of a blow at all.

In fact, it felt like I'd missed the mark entirely.

"She was a good woman unlike her younger sister. I had a lover of my own at the time, though, so nothing happened. You can rest easy. I didn't come to see you because I'm your father or anything. It's just plain old nostalgia."

Memories, just memories, he said, memories that aren't worth a plug nickel.

Now, that was definitely a lie. The part about them not being worth a plug nickel the "memories" part had to be true.

Okay.

It was only natural, all too natural…but this man's relationship with my mother had become nothing more than a memory long ago.

What about me?

Was my mother nothing but a memory to me too?

"…Do I look like my mother?"

"Hmm, hard to say. It was over fifteen years ago that I knew Gaen. You're her daughter, so I guess you look more like her than not, but I only vaguely recall her face."

"You've forgotten the face of the woman you were in love with?"

"Yeah, I'm cold but so are you, no?" Perhaps perceiving an

accusatory nuance in my words, Kaiki threw them back in my face. “You keep calling Gaen ‘that woman,’ ‘that person’… Is that any way to refer to your mother? She died over ten years ago. You’ve started to forget her, haven’t you?”

“…”

That isn’t the case at all.

In fact, my mother is rooted in my heart, etched there so deeply that I could never forget her. Inseparable from my being.

Inscribed in me.

So deeply that I see her in my dreams, and I hear her voice speaking to me.

It’s just from the time I was little, heck, from the time I was a baby, I’ve always called Toé Gaen

I’ve always called that person “that person.”

…Yet the monkey’s paw that I thought was inseparable separated from me so easily would that person be cut off from my heart in the same way someday? I didn’t expect to find out Kaiki’s true relationship with my mother way back when but just as he seemed to have processed it thoroughly.

“At the very least, your mother wasn’t the type to keep mulling things over. Earlier I said you’re simple, but Gaen was probably even simpler than a kid like you. Her way of thinking was so simple that everyone around her fell on their faces all on their own. Speaking of which, that woman once said, ‘Once you’ve thought, you’ve already thought wrong. Don’t waste even a moment of your life on thinking’ in that regard, at least, she was possessed of a philosophy mutually exclusive to my own.”

“…”

From those words, from the way he uttered those words that were so clearly hers, I knew that Kaiki still cared about her. And that the goodwill to treat me to this meal obviously sprung from that. It

wasn't "me (her daughter)" he was interacting with, it was "her daughter (me)"—and at the same time, I could see that his goodwill formed a closed circuit within himself.

He wasn't trying to deceive me.

He'd come to check in on me "incidentally"—it seemed I could take that at face value as well.

He was just flipping the pages of a photo album.

Like a perfectly normal person.

…Would it come for me too someday?

The day when a person I had fancied, when unrealized desire, became nostalgic memory?

Unrealized goals, unrequited love.

Would the day come when I could look back on them and laugh?

"It will. The toys and stuffed animals you loved when you were a kid, you get sick of them someday, no? Or is 'get sick of them' too harsh? Maybe I should say you graduate from them."

"Graduate…"

"Well, either way, Suruga, I'm glad that Gaen's legacy is doing well. That left arm isn't even injured, is it?"

…He threw it in so casually that it took me a few seconds to realize he'd seen through the secret I'd been keeping for almost an entire year, but in the course of those few seconds, before I could react, Kaiki produced a case from his suit jacket pocket. He opened the case and held out his business card.

As I went to take it, he said, "Oops," and drew it back for a moment, taking a fountain pen from his breast pocket and running it across the card, then holding it out to me once more.

Like he was drying it over the brazier.

I saw that the title “Ghostbuster” had been crossed out.

Ghostbuster Deishu Kaiki

And there were two telephone numbers (mobile) and two email addresses (Gmail and his mobile again).

“What’s this…”

“I don’t envision it happening, but if you’re ever in trouble, get in touch. I kind of promised that woman I’d watch out for you.”

“Are you trying to trick me?” I asked reflexively, though I didn’t think for a second that he was. I had to ask, though. “…Like you did Senjogahara-senpai?”

“Nope, no tricks when it comes to you,” he replied bluntly.

Of course, that’s exactly what a swindler would say□but while it got on my nerves, there was really nothing I could add.

“You really respect your beloved senpai, don’t you, Suruga? You’d feel like you were being faithless to them if you didn’t steel yourself to keep on disliking me, to keep on feeling negatively towards me.”

“…”

Kaiki spoke like he’d seen directly into my heart.

“But it’s pointless. I’m not deceiving you, and I mean you no harm. So you can’t hate me.”

“…”

“In the same way that someone you like won’t necessarily like you back□someone you dislike won’t necessarily dislike you back. They might not even let you dislike them.”

“You…may be right.”

“I am right. If you think I’m just going to sit back and be someone you hate, you’re dead wrong. Let me put it this way. Let’s say

there's someone you respect. There's got to be someone who hates that person so much that they want to kill them. Araragi and Senjogahara are probably heroes in your eyes, but nevertheless there has to be at least one person who hates them to an absurd degree."

"…"

"We aren't comic-book characters. There aren't people you can completely hate, or people who are completely evil. No one's nature is identical from every perspective, or at every point in time. Your forte is running, but you don't always run, do you? Sometimes you walk, sometimes you lie down. It's the same. I love money, but I also spend that money."

Sometimes I'm even kind to people, even if I'm not particularly attached to them, Kaiki admitted with a grimace—the expression might have been a masochistic smile, but I couldn't be sure.

In the end, I guess he was right.

In the same way that I unconditionally lionized people who could run fast, others tended to view great ability as an indicator of superior character.

But in reality it wasn't that simple.

You hear all the time about supposedly "great men" abusing their children or engaging in sordid relationships—and the opposite was also possible.

People who're abhorred as villains are sometimes excellent fathers, or sweet daughters—there are even misers who exhaust the limits of atrocity to make their money and then donate the bulk of it to local charities.

Evil deeds can in turn help people, and malice can serve people's needs—but enough already. No need to unfold some grand theory of humanity.

All that needs to be said is this.

The people you hate also have friends.

The people you hate also have people who love them.

That is patently true, and if you don't accept it, you won't be able to function in society.

Yes.

This man who hurt my friends wasn't going to hurt me, no matter what.

No matter how far I went in my duty to them by hating this man he'd continue being kind to me.

Kaiki would keep fulfilling his duty to my mother.

My friends' bitter enemy was a kindly uncle to me.

"If I'm ever in trouble, get in touch, huh?"

"Yes. I'll hoodwink just about anyone for you."

"…In that case, I don't want to get in touch with you."

If I'm ever in trouble.

That phrase made me think of Lord Devil of Numachi, whereabouts currently unknown, the unaccounted-for woman. Roka Numachi, the collector of troubles, of worries of misfortune.

"But I'll accept your goodwill, anyway."

So saying, I filched the business card from his hand and thrust it into my pocket in a deliberately brusque manner. That was the sole act of protest remaining to me.

I probably shouldn't have accepted it. I should have put my duty to my friends first. I ought to have dropped the business card straight onto the wire mesh over the brazier and let it burn.

But what Kaiki offered wasn't goodwill towards me, but my mother so I had to accept it.

I was nothing but a middleman for his goodwill, for his kindness, for everything.

“What’s wrong? Your meat-eating hand has stopped. Meat, meat, meat meat meat. Beef, beef, pork, chicken, beef, beef, offal, offal, eat it in that order. You’re a little on the skinny side. Pig out on some meat.”

“I don’t easily build muscle or put on weight. Exercise wasn’t always my forte. I was a scrawny kid. I used to be a slow runner…”

I said this with my loss to Kaiki running through my head.

Yes.

That’s why I had wished on the Devil’s Hand and gotten stuck making the outrageous wish come true on my own.

So these legs of mine are my property.

And the proof of my transgression.

Out of failure, strength…or something like that?

“Hmph. You seem genuinely pissed that you lost to me. Well, I was on the track and field team in junior and senior high, if it makes you feel any better.”

“Track and field…”

You wouldn’t know it to look at him.

You can’t judge a book by its cover, and even less so someone’s past.

“Oh, want me to teach you the running style I came up with? It’s called the Kaiki Stride.”

“…I’m all set.”

Even if he was speaking from a place of kindness, it was simply too humiliating. And there was no way I could use a technique that

bore his name.

“I don’t do track and field anyway, I’m on the basketball team. Or I was, before I retired.”

“Right, it was Senjogahara who did track and field.”

“…”

“Well, I say track and field, but my specialty was the shot-put.” Whether this was a joke or not I couldn’t tell, but following up on the evasive remark (at this rate the whole track and field thing was starting to feel like a lie), he said, “If you can get by without coming to me for help, so much the better, that’s for sure.” But also: “It’d be better to rely on me than on the Monkey’s Paw, though.”

“Uh…”

“She entrusted it to you, didn’t she? Your mother. That mummified Monkey’s Paw,” Kaiki clarified like it was nothing. “Just to be on the safe side, let me tell you now: absolutely do not use it. A junk man will probably show up before long, so just hand it over then.”

“Junk man?”

“Yes. What you might call a collector.”

A collector, the man says.

“There’s someone trying to gather all the body parts of a devil. I expect they’ll try and steal the Monkey’s Paw from you I’m saying this for your own good: just give it to them when they show up.”

“…Okay.”

Assenting, I glanced down at my left arm which up until recently had been that selfsame Devil’s Arm.

It had already been stolen.

“Got it. If and when this collector appears, I’ll just hand over the ‘hand’ that person entrusted to me.”

“You’re being oddly obliging. Does that mean you’ve already gotten rid of it? If so, that’s well and good. Now then, it seems like you can’t get on with your meal while you’re looking at my gloomy mug.” Removing his bib and standing up with that bit of self-awareness, Kaiki extracted a few bills out of his wallet and put them on the table. “I’m going to head home you take your time. Order yourself another two or three plates. Meat. Eat meat. Meat, I say.”

So long, he bid curtly and made to leave the private room without a shred of reluctance at which I unconsciously called out, “Hang on…”

Hm, Kaiki turned back to look at me.

Though I’d called to him, there wasn’t anything I wanted to ask, and God knows I didn’t want to feel even guiltier than I already did by continuing to dine with him.

Still, somehow.

I’d called to him.

“Um. I…”

“What is it? Have you fallen for me?”

“…”

“I’m joking. Boy, you really are a serious girl.”

“…Everyone keeps on saying that,” I grumbled in a small, petulant voice in response to Kaiki’s remark. “And I’m sick of it.”

“Oh? Isn’t ‘serious’ usually meant as a compliment?”

“I don’t deserve the overestimation. I’m stupid, foolish. And I’m a clown. The word ‘serious’ actually doesn’t suit me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. Also, I’m a coward.”

A liar and a coward.

Who was I to criticize Kaiki, anyway—I'd lied to my teammates, people I should have trusted, about why I was quitting.

That was wrong, any way you slice it.

"The way I see it," opined Kaiki, "seriousness and cowardice aren't necessarily incompatible. But I don't give a shit whether you're serious or not. What is it? Why did you stop me?"

"Oh—yeah." I wracked my brains and finally came up with something to ask him, narrowly managing to salvage the situation. "How did you know I would show up at the station today? How come you were able to ambush me there?"

"Because I heard you'd be there. From your friend."

I'd only asked the question to weasel out of a fix, but upon consideration, it was the very first thing I should have done—hell-bent on reviling Kaiki, I'd completely forgotten my initial feeling that something was off.

For him, however, it seemed to be a "you only have to ask" kind of a thing.

"My friend… You mean, Higasa?"

"Higasa?"

As the one who invited me to the open campus, she was the only friend I could think of who could be his source. Still, it was hard to imagine someone who claimed to be shy counting Kaiki as an acquaintance, and he was reacting like he'd never heard her name before.

"That—wasn't the kid's name."

"Then what was it?"

"Numachi," he answered. "Roka Numachi. Yeah, I'm pretty sure that was it."

017

Apparently the smell clings to your entire body even at classy barbecue places, so as soon as I got home, I decided to take a bath.

I scrupulously scrubbed my hair and body then immersed myself in the tub, which I had filled to the brim. I sank in up to my shoulders, up to my neck.

My hair was much longer than it had been back when I was playing basketball, and I left it down as I got into the tub, so it floated on the surface like seaweed.

How had Numachi and Kaiki come in contact? I couldn't figure it out, and I hadn't asked. Kaiki might know where I could find Numachi, but I couldn't ask without bringing up Lord Devil and my left arm.

I felt like it might be dangerous to share too much info with that man.

However avuncular Deishu Kaiki might be with me, placing excessive trust in him was risky. Even if I got off unscathed, there was no guarantee that his machinations wouldn't affect anyone around me.

"But I'm more worried about Numachi giving Kaiki that information than about Kaiki himself…"

Why would she do that?

What was her goal?

Had she found out that I was looking for her?

Either way□I couldn't be concerned about keeping up appearances anymore.

No more putting on a show.

Up to that point some part of me had thought that I would try my best to find her, and if I couldn't, then so be it. But now it seemed I had to break out of that mentality of good sportsmanship.

At this stage in the game, fair play was not what was called for.

What was called for was a single-mindedness to settle things with her no matter what—which probably folded in my anger at having been bested by Kaiki in a sprint, and if so, all the better.

Because it was an incontrovertible fact that I suffered the humiliating defeat thanks to Numachi tipping him off about my trip.

After continuing my full-body soak for about thirty minutes, I got out and wrapped a towel around my head like a turban, threw a bathrobe over my still-damp naked body, and returned to my room to call Karen.

"I've got a favor to ask, Karen, think you can help me?"

She responded with a quick "Sure, of course" after a moment of quizzical silence.

I felt a little guilty about exploiting her faith in me—particularly since this was a personal matter, unrelated in any way to "justice."

"I think there's a girl called Roka Numachi living here in town, can you help me find her?"

"Sure thing!" she agreed without hesitation—once she decided on a course, she never wavered, it seemed.

Hmm. I really worry about her.

Protect her, big brother!

Then again, the number-one threat to her safety was that big brother.

“What middle school did she attend?”

I gave her all the data I had, a mixture of what I’d already known and info I’d gathered over the course of the past week.

“Got it. With that much info and Tsukihi’s help, it’ll be a sure thing. Let’s see… Okay then, I should be in touch some time tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? No need to rush…”

“Not rushing might be hard for Tsukihi—she’s been on a real ‘better to burn out than to fade away’ kick lately. I wonder why… She used to take it so easy, it was like she was immortal or something.”

“Hunh…”

Search me.

I don’t really know Tsukihi.

We’ve barely met.

“All right,” I said. “Anyway, I appreciate it. I promise I’ll find some way to repay you.”

“Kwaaa? Just hang out with me again sometime,” Karen returned cheerfully.

It was a reassuring, happy reply.

Totally crushable.

I just said, “Thank you,” and left it at that.

But—in the end, the former Fire Sisters struck out.

No, they didn’t actually strike out.

Karen did thoroughly investigate Numachi for me, as I’d requested.

Just as you’d expect of an Araragi—but in the very, very short term, the request itself was superfluous to our tale.

Because the very next day, Monday.

At school, in my own homeroom of all places I came face to face with Roka Numachi once again.

018

“When I was still in school, I thought it was the rudest thing in the world when my classmates addressed our teacher without proper honorifics. I thought they were shameful, acting like they were adults when they were still just kids and pretending to be on equal footing with someone who actually earned a salary. I felt strongly that a teacher should be spoken to with respect, so I addressed them properly even if they sucked, regardless of what the other kids did. I thought it was overfamiliar and impolite to throw people’s names around. What a proper kid I am, with real manners, I used to think.”

The next morning.

When I hauled myself into my new third-year classroom that I was just starting to get used to, Numachi was sitting there all by herself□in my seat, no less□with her legs crossed obnoxiously like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Mister Oshino would have said, I’ve been waiting.

It’s not like I’d arrived particularly early□in fact, since my morning schedule is packed, I often arrive later than my schoolmates, and that day was no exception.

And yet, there was no one in the classroom other than Numachi.

Had she chased them out? No, if a girl with her demeanor, clearly an outsider, planted herself in the center of the classroom, Naoetsu High’s quiet, indoor-kid herbivores wouldn’t even be able to cross the threshold, as if some kind of force field were in place.

Even I might do an about-face if I didn’t know her□if it weren’t for our fateful meeting the other day.

Her wild brown hair alone, less dyed than punished in some kind of

self-flagellation, had that much power.

The wise man avoids danger, as they say.

Then again, the proper aphorism for the occasion was probably: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“But when I think about it now, maybe it was actually the kids who called them by name who had it right. Etiquette aside, I think they did because they weren’t worried about someone’s position, they only cared about who they were as a person. By getting the etiquette right, I got it wrong. I’ve completely forgotten all those teachers whom I supposedly revered. I have no idea what their names were. Japanese, Math, Science, Social Studies Technology and Home Ec, Music, Phys Ed. I thought of all of them only as ‘teachers,’ and I never got it that each of them were real people with their own individual lives.”

“…”

“Middle school and high school are different in some ways, of course, but those are the, what, the impressions that came to me upon visiting a school for the first time in ages.”

With this, Numachi gave a leisurely shrug, and taking hold of the crutch that had been leaning against the desk, she stood up (in a leisurely fashion, of course).

“Why are you here? Or actually…” I asked, confused. Yes, confusion. The Lord Devil whom, up until yesterday, I couldn’t find no matter how hard I tried, was right there in front of me in the classroom I’d totally thought of as my own turf.

I felt like I really was face to face with a devil.

“…Why have you come here?”

“I just happened to be passing by not. In fact, it was a hell of a stealth mission sneaking into this school without being detected. And I came to see you, obviously. I thought maybe you wanted to see me.”

“Well…”

All I could muster was that vague response.

In my head, I wondered if yesterday’s call to Karen had already borne fruit, but that didn’t seem likely.

It was simply too soon.

Then—thanks to my investigations the previous week, so to speak…—Numachi somehow got wind of it…

And she was here to see me.

But why?

She was here to see me?

How come?

Total confusion.

“What’s the matter, Kanbaru,” she said. “Isn’t there something you want to ask me? That’s why I so kindly legged it over here to see you.” She raised her leg laboriously—the leg that was encased in a plaster cast.

Laboriously.

Nastily.

“I don’t need to ask it anymore,” I told her.

“Hm?”

“Now that we’ve met face to face like this—now that I’ve seen that left arm.”

I pointed.

At Numachi’s left arm, also encased in a plaster cast—the end of which was peeking out of the sleeve of her baggy jersey.

She hadn’t been wearing the cast the other day.

Had she had an accident since then and broken her arm?

No, that hypothesis itself was too laborious, noxious.

There was no need to quibble with the evidence, but if I were to anyway, she was using that encased left arm to hold her crutch.

If you really had a broken arm, you could never pull that off. And even if you could, you wouldn’t.

So there was only one answer. A single possibility.

“You,” I said, “stole my left arm.”

“I hauled away your junk. Or I collected it,” Numachi rephrased, taking some gum out of her pocket like she couldn’t care less about our conversation.

Not a stick of gum, but the kind that comes in a bottle. The whole bottle seemed to have been shoved into her pocket. Which wouldn’t have worked if her jersey weren’t so big.

Opening the lid, she shook six or so pieces out onto her palm, threw them all into her mouth, and started chomping.

A thrilling display.

“Want some?”

“Nope…”

“’Kay.”

Her offer having been declined, Numachi returned the bottle to her pocket, a little disappointedly but without any hesitation.

She performed the entire operation with her left hand.

It was in a plaster cast, but her fingers were sticking out and merely bandaged so she could use it normally.

“When? When the hell did you take it?”

“While you were enjoying that little breast massage I gave you. Though that was the prep. It took effect the next morning, right?”

Her prediction was accurate□but for the planner to guess the plan wasn’t in the least bit impressive.

In fact it was ridiculous, like a culprit boasting about her crime.

“Hey, why are you glaring at me like that? Shouldn’t you be thanking me, Kanbaru? After all, I took care of the arm that was the source of your worries.”

“My arm wasn’t□”

“It wasn’t worrying you? Really? Says the girl who made such a face□when she saw my leg?”

“…”

What sort of face had I made? Seeing the broken leg of my former archrival who’d been forced to retire due to it□wait.

“Wait a sec… Speaking of your left leg. Don’t tell me it’s also…”

Even as I began to voice the thought, I arrived at the conclusion that no, it was inconceivable. I mean, unlike my (fictional) situation, Numachi’s injury had come in the middle of a game, hadn’t it?

In other words, she was surrounded by spectators when it occurred, so she couldn’t be faking it.

Her injury was real.

But that said□since she really had stolen my arm…or if not my arm, the devil’s arm, it wasn’t unreasonable to assume that she was the “collector” that Deishu Kaiki had mentioned.

I felt uneasy, but this was an unease that had an answer.

“Kaiki…” I began—knowing full well that it was absolutely not the kind of thing to ask Numachi point blank—“didn’t know you were the collector?”

Hedging and using the interrogative form was my last little act of resistance. The question assumed that Numachi was Kaiki’s “junk man.” Come to think of it, she’d already admitted that she’d stolen my left arm, so I was the questionable one here.

“Oh. So he did find you yesterday. Glad to hear it.” Her response, though, was that blithe remark. She continued, “And yes, that swindler knows the truth about me perfectly well. We’ve known each other for a while, and we’re very well acquainted. He’s a weird fellow—I’m not talking about his swindling technique, I mean that no matter who he’s talking to, he always seems to give the other person only half the information he has. I don’t really understand his philosophy myself, but he seems to always want to be a ‘bona fide third party.’ Or is it more like he ‘sets aside’ information, on principle? Like he doesn’t want to be the director. In fact, he doesn’t even want to appear in a supporting role. You could say he’s devoted to working behind the scenes. He knew all about my secret identity, and I’m sure he realized that your arm had been taken. But he didn’t talk about it. Why, I have no idea. Maybe it’s his policy, or more likely he didn’t want to jinx it.”

“…”

Only say half of what you’re thinking.

What such a principle could be based on, I will never understand—but the fearsomely systematic mechanism made some kind of sense to me.

It did match up with the portrait of Kaiki that my seniors had painted for me—they both agreed that he was always oddly reluctant to give out information.

Interesting.

So—he was also being stingy with his info yesterday?

Accusing him of deceiving me would be going too far, but realizing that the man was indeed a congenital swindler was strangely calming.

But, that was interesting. Numachi was the “collector” in question, after all—yet in that case.

“What were you up to, telling a guy like Kaiki that I’d be going to that open campus yesterday? Thankfully, nothing bad came of it—but it could have.”

“But it didn’t. Right?”

“Don’t hide behind the outcome.”

“You say that like the outcome isn’t what matters most—listen, I’d been hearing about you from Kaiki. He also wanted to see you, but for some reason he couldn’t. I can’t just turn a blind eye to a person in need, can I?”

“Give me a break.”

“Just kidding.”

“All right, I don’t care what you were up to—but I’ll never feel comfortable unless you tell me how you knew I’d be going to the open campus.”

“Gathering rumors is where I shine.”

“…”

She was slippery as an eel, this one.

I couldn’t even have a proper chat with her.

In which case, I was just going to get down to business.

“Numachi…you weren’t only collecting unhappiness, I take it. You were a collector not only of unhappiness, but of a devil? I don’t get it, why would you—”

“That’s what I’ve come to this schoolhouse full of good little boys and girls to explain to you. Say, Kanbaru, you free after class today?”

“…Yeah,” I answered. I would have said yes even if I wasn’t.

“Then I’ll be waiting for you after school at the gym. Looks like it’s about time for the first bell to ring, so I’m going to pull back for the moment. We can talk more then.”

It was unclear to me how she had the nerve to select a public place like the school gymnasium for our appointment. The gym after school, full of students engaging in club activities, seemed like an especially untenable choice if she was worried about being seen□but when she pushed that arrangement on me so authoritatively, I couldn’t think of anything to say.

She was the kind of woman who barged into my classroom.

She probably had something in mind□in reality, after meeting up at the gym, we might move to another location.

So we could talk some more.

So she could talk to me some more.

“Sounds good… I’m looking forward to hearing your story.”

“And hear it you shall. And I want to hear what you have to say as well, about this arm□”

She approached and thrust the arm out at me as she said this.

That arm that so very recently had been my own.

She shoved it at me.

Like she was shoving me away.

“What are you talking about? Why would you want to hear about my left arm□”

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Numachi, a smile creeping ever so slowly onto her face.

A touch of monomania tinging her voice.

“Knowing the provenance of the pieces is crucial for any precious collection.”

019

As soon as Numachi left the classroom, all the other students came swarming in as though they'd been lurking right outside the door.

I say "as though," but I wondered if maybe they actually had been. In that case, it was pretty cold-blooded of them to watch from a safe distance as I was confronted by an obviously dangerous individual. Thankfully, that wasn't it; by coincidence every single one of them had happened to get a late start that day, and they'd all made it to school just in time.

Weird, right? Bizarre.

One of those coincidences that almost seem planned.

Reminds me of a story I heard, where lightning struck a church during mass but no one was hurt because every single one of the usually punctual faithful happened to be late that day for one reason or another.

Okay, God might strike me down for making that comparison.

Because if someone was pulling the strings, it was neither God nor an angel, but Lord Devil.

Which was no longer just a name for attracting clients□since her left arm, at the very least, had been transformed into that of a devil.

And I suspected that her left leg, too□

"What's the matter, Ruga? You're looking grim."

"Higasa…"

I couldn't bring myself to inform my friend, ebullient as always, that my former archrival had been in our classroom until moments

before, let alone describe how utterly, tragically transformed she'd been to the point that both inwardly and outwardly she was barely human.

"…It's nothing. That open campus yesterday was fun, huh? Maybe not that college in particular, but it really made me excited about college in general. Gotta put my nose to the exam prep grindstone from here on out."

Higasa must have felt a little uncomfortable at my ham-fisted change of subject, but she let it pass without comment, like a true friend.

The curriculum was taken care of in what felt like the blink of an eye and after school.

I went to the gym.

Where a lone figure stood waiting amid the cavernous emptiness Roka Numachi.

The crutch that should have been supporting her broken leg was lying on the floor and she was standing on that leg as though nothing was wrong with it, dribbling a basketball in an easy rhythm with the plaster-sheathed left hand that should have been holding the crutch.

She was waiting for me.

Roka Numachi was waiting for Suruga Kanbaru.

"How 'bout a little one-on-one?" she skipped the pleasantries.

Ah ha.

That's why she'd chosen the gym and not somewhere else as our after-school rendezvous point.

It was the only place around with a basketball court.

And just like that morning, she'd taken care of everything, clearing out all and sundry. The volleyball team, the badminton team, and

of course the basketball team each would have their own reason for showing up late.

And so I answered her.

Anyone who'd answer differently was no basketball player at all.

"Let's do it."

020

As someone celebrated for leading the Naoetsu High girls' basketball team to the nationals, people may get the wrong impression when I say this—and the Ogis of the world may very well be disappointed to hear it—but part of me wants to make the highly irregular argument that there is no winning or losing in the sport of basketball.

Maybe that goes beyond irregular, all the way to irrational?

Or maybe it's just irrelevant?

But the thing is, I'm not saying this to flaunt my eccentricities and come across like some superior athlete. It's how I really feel.

I've come to the conclusion that the more you play it, and the more absorbed in it you become, the more unfathomable is this sport of basketball.

I've come to feel like it's not about winning or losing.

Every game of basketball has an outcome, of course, but that strikes me as a little different than victory or defeat.

I think my feeling stems from the reality that, man or woman, there isn't a single player on Earth who can boast a perfect shooting percentage.

Some say it's actually rebounds that are most important in basketball, but that's only because there are so many missed shots to begin with.

No player shoots with the intention of missing, while on the other side, the defense is doing everything they can to block the shot.

As a result, the success or failure of a shot becomes a matter of

probability—the identical shot will go in sometimes, and sometimes it won't.

Mm-hmm, probability.

There's no getting around the fact that there are stronger teams and weaker teams, of course, but if you follow my argument to its logical conclusion, the outcome will be a matter of luck in any game between teams that are both above a certain level.

The lucky team wins—and the unlucky team loses.

I've felt this way for a while.

I don't expect anyone to go along with my opinion, and other basketball players—Higasa, for instance—might be pissed off if I told them how I felt, but the fact is that there have been times when my team beat a team that was clearly better than us, and times when the opposite occurred.

You might call it "the flow of the match."

That's just putting lipstick on a pig, though, and I prefer to call it "a muddle," or even "a fluke."

I have no idea how it looks to the spectators, but from the perspective of a player on the court, there isn't much difference between the winners and the losers. Because the smallest change in the flow could easily have taken things in the other direction.

This applies to all sports, not just basketball, I imagine—the time you spend practicing and honing your skills is the main event, and the games are just the icing on the cake, just a chance to try your luck.

The old advice to "practice like it's the real thing and treat the real thing like it's practice" is right on the money.

Which is why I honestly wasn't that upset when our team was eliminated from the national tournament my first year in high school.

Some of the older kids on the team cried, but I thought we played just as well as the other team, so it didn't feel to me like we had "lost."

It's frustrating to lose at a game of chance because your luck is worse (Araragi-senpai likes to make fun of me for that), but in a game of skill like basketball, there's no reason to be ashamed when you lose based on luck, no reason for regret.

That's how I feel.

At the root of that value system is the fact that "running" was what first drove me to start training as an athlete.

Track and field.

There's no room there for something like the flow to worm its way in.

No muddle, no flukes.

It's a completely merit-based contest, where the faster person wins and the slower person loses. Elements of chance don't enter into it.

Not that I belonged to the track team or anything□at the time I thought that there was no room for a sore loser like me in a world of clear winners and losers.

What might I do if I lost?

I had no clue.

A person like me is not cut out for competition.

Sorry for droning on like this, but what I'm trying to say is that basketball is a sport I play for the genuine love of the game.

I truly enjoy playing it, accompanied by absolutely no negative feelings whatsoever.

If you accused me of insulting the game of basketball, of not taking it seriously, I could only hang my head and say that you're exactly

right.

Exactly right.

I don't take it seriously.

I mean, even in a one-on-one game against Numachi, who didn't exactly fill me with warm feelings—I forgot everything.

I forgot about Lord Devil, I forgot about the devil's arm.

And just totally got into it.

We dove in without even worrying about the hassle of keeping score, alternating offense and defense in dizzying succession.

In the end, I think we shared the understanding that she probably won in terms of points but that I did in terms of substance.

While my school uniform may have given me a slight handicap against Numachi in her tracksuit (such as it was), in reality that handicap amounted to essentially nothing. At the very least it was insignificant.

She managed somehow or other to propel herself with her plaster-encased left arm and leg like normal—though in my experience, those "devil" parts aren't even comparable to human limbs in terms of physical power, so maybe "like normal" isn't the right way to put it—that being said, the casts themselves were a real hindrance, so her playing style was undeniably clumsy at times.

In fact, when I attacked from her left—or when I focused on guarding her from the right, she crumbled easily.

The problem was that she was blocking so many of my all-important shots that, score-wise, I think she almost certainly won.

Roka Numachi's Quagmire Defense seemed to be fully functional, even after all this time.

Which reminds me that back when we were both active players, a rather warped ethos had been attributed to Numachi's undeniably

strong team: As long as you don't lose, you win.

She'd seemed like the odd one out, but maybe she was that ethos' poster child.

Take her "unhappiness collection" as Lord Devil□using time to neutralize problems, that idea's vertical axis, could be thought of as its expression.

Even after getting injured and retiring□switching schools and down in the dumps as she was now, maybe she was still a basketball player at heart.

"You should have dunked." Our strength at long last completely spent after an hour or more of reckless attack and defense, Numachi made that critique. "With the way I am now, it'd make you unstoppable one-on-one."

"…I actually don't like dunking."

"Yeah? Really?"

"It feels like cheating."

Maybe cheating is going too far.

Maybe it's more appropriate to call it a last resort, or a trump card□I never did it much during actual games. There probably isn't a single high school girl in Japan besides me who can dunk, so I could never shake the feeling that it was a cheap move.

In terms of probability, and the flow and all that, dunking involves putting the ball directly into the hoop, so it boasts a hundred-percent success rate.

Hmm, was I stingy with it because I want to skirt the issue of winning and losing?

"I mean, that's freestyle basketball," I said. "You do it to entertain the crowd more than to win."

"Huh. Makes a runt like me jealous, though. From my perspective

it’s a legit skill.”

“It’s not like I’m tall.”

“Really? You were shorter back then—me, I stopped growing back in the first year of middle school.”

Once she said this, I noticed that indeed Numachi didn’t seem to have grown a single inch.

Focusing on her hair color, I’d ended up with a strong impression that she’d transformed—but making her hair black again and putting her in her old uniform might easily resurrect the Numachi from our playing days.

…Or maybe not.

She’d wandered too far off the path these last three years to return to the old days. Even if she herself hadn’t changed, her way of life was too different.

I’m not one to talk, but—at least I don’t go around collecting “devil” parts.

You don’t see me starting any literally diabolical collections.

Her left leg.

Her left arm.

Those plaster casts weren’t just concealing the surface.

“If a devil would grant me any wish,” Numachi said, playing around with the ball, which was pretty big in comparison to her small frame, “I think I’d wish to be taller.”

“…”

“No, if I did, I might start slaughtering everyone around me who’s taller than me—and I’d be taller, relatively speaking.”

According to the crybaby devil, she insinuated.

To me.

“Kanbaru, what did you wish for, I wonder?”

“…I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Oh come on. We’ve already had such an intense conversation. With this.” Numachi rolled the basketball across the floor towards me. “What is there left to hide?”

“True—in which case, promise you’ll talk to me honestly, that you won’t keep anything back, either.”

“Sure. But what should I talk about?”

“What you’ve been doing these past three years.”

“Didn’t I already tell you?”

“This time I want you to include the stuff you left out before.” I rolled the ball back to her. “That left leg of yours—and the arm.”

“Sure,” she agreed readily, so readily that it felt anti-climactic. “But you have to go first.”

“…”

“The more entertaining your story, the provenance of this left arm I retrieved from you—the more I’ll tell you in return… Hey Kanbaru, do you have a type? Of boys you like, I mean?”

“I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Ah…you always did seem like a lesbo. That was the rumor going around.”

“I can’t deny it. But I like boys too. I like them on the small side, and kind.”

“Oh yeah? I have a type, too. At this point in my life,” Numachi prefaced like some old lady though we were the same age, “I don’t care about looks or their personality anymore. What kind of a life

he’s had, his background, his backstory, that’s what I go for—I’m hoping this left arm’s backstory will be interesting to me.”

“Don’t expect an interesting story from me,” I said, a little fed up with Numachi’s roundabout style. “People always seem to get the wrong impression—but I’m an extremely uninteresting person.”

Yes.

I’m not interesting—just hypocritical.

021

It really isn't an interesting story.

And I, myself, don't fully grasp the particulars of everything surrounding the arm□the Monkey's Paw or the Devil's Hand or whatever you want to call it. Like Kaiki said, it's just something I inherited from my mother.

My mother.

If we're going to talk about Toé Gaen's legacy, that tattered, desiccated left hand in its paulownia box is it as far as I'm concerned.

Because it's the one and only thing□my mother left to me.

It makes me a little sad to think about.

I think I would have preferred if she just didn't leave me anything at all.

It was probably my mother who inducted Kaiki-the-swindler into the world of aberrations, but for all that, she didn't teach me a thing.

She didn't tell me anything about how to use the Monkey's Paw.

If I'd known what kind of item it was, I doubt I would have used it□no, now I'm just making excuses.

I would have used it, even if I'd known.

That's the kind of person I am. A weak one.

And I'm probably just trying to pass the buck by saying that she didn't teach me anything.

It's true that the only object she left me was that sketchy-ass hand, but she also left me her words.

She taught me all kinds of things about how to live my life.

"If you can't be medicine, be poison. Otherwise you're nothing but water."

I learned that from her—it's just that I haven't been able to make use of that particular nugget of wisdom.

I let it get swept away on the tides of time.

Simply forgetting it.

"Huh. 'I want to be able to run faster' and 'I want to be by my beloved senpai's side again'—those are pretty simple-hearted wishes. I might even go so far as to call them mediocre."

Those were Numachi's thoughts on the story I'd just finished telling her. Kind of harsh, when she'd made me do so—but leaving out the part about Araragi-senpai being a vampire might have diminished the overall impact of my arm's backstory.

But it'd have taken all night to give a full account of his relationship to Shinobu, and I didn't think it was anything that I, as an outsider, should be telling people.

He was the only one who had the right. For Numachi, who subsisted on the unhappiness of others, his story might have been a real feast. I had to wonder…

How would Araragi-senpai deal with this baffling brown-haired girl?

"I'd heard a thing or two about Senjogahara. She and Hanekawa were making waves even beyond Kiyokaze Middle," Numachi said. "So Senjogahara was ill, huh? That's tough. I'd have loved to hear her story. Well, she's better now, that's all that matters."

Yup, I lied about that as well.

Of course, there was no way I could tell Numachi that Senjogahara-senpai had met a crab aberration. But the relaxed look on her face as she relished my “pity-bragging,” even while venting all sorts of horrible thoughts and whatnot, made me feel guilty, as though I’d spat out lies for my own selfish reasons.

I’m not against lying per se, but it felt like I was conning her.

Did Deishu Kaiki feel that way all the time?

It’s hasty to assume that someone who’s skilled in the art of deception has no scruples about deceiving people, when you think about it.

Likewise

Just because Numachi collects people’s unhappiness, just because she seems thrilled and proactive about it doesn’t necessarily mean she has zero scruples.

We have no idea how other people really feel.

And when it’s not just unhappiness that she’s gathering, but the pieces of a “devil” what the hell could her motivation be?

“Well, I suppose time solved Senjogahara’s problem, too? Well, she was sick, so maybe ‘salved’ is a better word.”

“No… Haven’t you been listening? It was the guy who’s now her boyfriend who solved her problem and he was the one who solved my problem, too.”

“Huh, okay. Sounds like he’s quite a standup guy. That such a decent human being could even exist surprises me more than anything.”

“…”

Maybe I should have told her she was dead wrong about him being “decent” or a “standup guy.”

His character got more and more out of control as time went on, to

the point that even I, with my honeyed words, stopped being able to cover for him. It was a sad state of affairs that I found myself pausing about a mentor I respect so much.

Nevertheless.

Nevertheless, Araragi-senpai was Araragi-senpai to the end—and I'm sure he still is.

Right, however sordid his relationship with his little sisters may become…

"Heheh. Well, you really are more into girls than boys, aren't you, Kanbaru?"

"What do you mean, 'really'?"

"I mean that even back then, there was always something sketchy about the way you looked at your teammates and opponents."

"I never once looked at anyone in an unseemly way during a wholesome game of basketball."

Probably.

I think.

Though now that you mention it, I'm not so sure…

I might be seeing the past through rose-colored glasses—on our high school team, too, I'd made Higasa's life more difficult…

Aaaanyway, moving on.

"Hey, let's smooch."

"Pfff!"

I couldn't help but titter at Numachi's sudden proposal—because it seemed exactly like something I would say.

"Heheheh. I prefer girls to those oafish boys too, you know."

As she said this, Numachi started crawling towards me on all fours. Her movements were so slow, I should've been able to make my getaway very easily, but I just couldn't move, frozen like a deer in the headlights, or as if I were sewn to the floor.

Temporary paralysis?

Why?

Numachi slowed her pace even further, as if to savor me in that state, and after what seemed like ages, she entwined her body with mine and pushed me down onto the floor of the gymnasium.

I say she pushed me down, but she was a petite girl.

Plus, she couldn't adequately move the joints of her left arm and leg, restrained as they were by the plaster casts.

I was almost certainly her daddy in terms of simple physical strength, so I could have forced her off me if I wanted.

Even with her entire weight pressing down on me, I could have thrown her off easily□not to mention the fact that, while she was lying on top of me, she was doing so solicitously, tenderly, not actually pinning me down.

Even with her twined around me, the situation didn't change: I could have gotten away any time I wanted.

I should have been able to, but couldn't.

"In other words, you don't want to," Numachi said. From atop me. "There are so many people like that. Even though almost anything can be solved by running away□there are so many people who think that running away means you've lost. Kaiki would probably disagree, but from my point of view, they simply seem to be going out of their way to make themselves unhappy."

"Going out of their way□"

"There were basketball players like that too, weren't there? The self-defeating kind□what the hell is up with that, anyway? With

racing towards unhappiness.”

“Not racing… More like routed,” I said. From beneath Numachi. “It might be hard for someone like you, who was somewhat lacking in motivation as a player, to understand—never mind for someone who’s made a hobby of collecting other people’s unhappiness—but those people went in looking for something more important than winning or losing.”

“Than winning or losing?”

“Or—more important than happiness or unhappiness, maybe…”

What about me?

What was I looking for when I started playing basketball? Like I’d told Numachi, my initial incentive was dealing with the fallout from the wish I’d made on the Devil’s Hand.

Somewhere along the line I got hooked.

But—I really don’t think it was because I wanted to win.

Would Numachi have seen my style as “racing towards unhappiness”?

As being routed?

“But running away doesn’t mean you’ve lost, nor does it equal unhappiness,” she insisted. “If you try and fail to run away, you can at least feel resigned. Or, Kanbaru, maybe deep down inside, you want me to force a kiss on you?”

“…”

“We’re both boyish, but for some reason you strike me as more of a bottom than a top. It cracks me up that you, the Prince Charming whom all of your juniors adore, are more of a little girl than anyone. Our sense of self is so different from how others see us—not that either one is truer than the other.”

As she said this.

A bewitching smile rose to her lips, which moved ever so slowly towards my face.

“W-Wait a second…”

All I needed to do to escape Numachi’s hold was to roll over like I was turning in my sleep□but my body made no such attempt.

“S-S-Someone might come.”

“They won’t.”

“……!”

No, really, wait a second.

Sure, I talk all kinds of big talk to Araragi-senpai, but while I’ve got plenty of book learning under my belt, when it comes to practical experience, I’m a total□

“Smooch.”

Numachi lightly brushed my cheek with her fingers and withdrew quickly, in stark contrast to the languorous way she’d approached me.

“Disappointed?” she asked with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

“…”

I could make no reply, and, touching my cheek where she’d caressed it as if to make sure it was still there, I sat up.

Nrrgh.

She got me.

“Let’s keep things wholesome, nice and wholesome,” she said. “We’re young people with bright futures ahead of us, and if we keep playing with fire like this…”

She grabbed the ball she’d been holding under her arm and started dribbling it with her right hand, leaving me behind as she made for

the basket—then, planting her foot, the left one in the plaster cast, she took off.

I was sure she was going to do a lay-up, but to my surprise she went for a dunk.

I was under the impression that I was the only high school girl in Japan who could dunk—but she made it look easy.

Her hand stuffed the ball straight into the hoop.

“Freestyle basketball, indeed. Well said. Like some street performer’s show, for sure—a far cry from what I think of as the essence of basketball.” Numachi hung from the hoop as the ball bounced away across the floor. “But don’t forget that a master street performer is a true artist, too. Kanbaru, so you dislike dunking because it feels like cheating? Being able to do something no one else can do can give you a complex, perversely enough.”

Being too talented is a heavy burden, huh?

By that, she was talking about pressure, I thought, and therefore unhappiness.

Ultimately, in Numachi’s eyes, perhaps everything constituted a reason to be unhappy, anything could cause misfortune—not that she was wrong, necessarily.

“You definitely couldn’t dunk in middle school, though. I didn’t know you’d had the nickname Poison Swamp until Higasa told me, but I remember you being called Can’t-Jump Swamp.”

Then again, that moniker had come about as the abbreviated form of “The Swamp You Can’t Jump Out Of,” which played on her family name (literally “swamp”) and which she’d been called because her Quagmire Defense robbed whatever player she was guarding of the option to jump. It’s not that her style involved not jumping—still, there’s no way she could have dunked back then.

This isn’t a manga.

“Hahaha, well, either way I’m muddy terrain. In which case, I’d feel

better being called the Bottomless Swamp.”

“And with that leg.”

“Yup. With this leg,” she said, finally letting go of the hoop and dropping to the ground unbelievably, or maybe that was the whole point, but at any rate, ostentatiously landing on the gym floor with her plaster-encased left leg. “Well, your unhappiness is entirely my problem now. I, Lord Devil, have taken up the full burden. You don’t need to worry anymore, you can smile and live happily ever after and just forget about some devil’s arm.”

“…How can I?” She seemed halfway serious, in other words like she actually meant well, but there was no way I could accept her words just like that. “That arm is proof of my sins. If you think I’m going to let it be taken from me in a way I don’t even understand yet, if you think I’m going to let you shoulder it for me”

Araragi-senpai retains vampire factors in his body. That’s the proof of his sins an apology to Shinobu, a sign of his sincerity, I think. He can probably go back to being fully human any time he wants. That’s what Mister Oshino said, anyway.

But he wouldn’t.

Not a chance.

So I couldn’t just let go of that arm, either

“That’s my arm,” I declared.

“Nope. It’s a devil’s arm.”

“If that’s the case, haven’t you retired Lord Devil?”

“Then I just start calling myself O Most Gracious Lord Devil. According to a certain ominous gentleman, this thing belonged to your mother. So it was your arm for exactly no time at all, not for a single second.”

And so saying.

Numachi rolled up the sleeve of her baggy tracksuit to the shoulder, exposing the plaster cast to me—and in the blink of an eye.

With the strength of that arm—she split the cast open.

Shattered it, more like.

And, no surprise, what appeared from within was indeed—or rather, of course—that all-too-familiar beast's arm, covered in thick hair.

"Hm?"

No, although I wasn't surprised as such—wasn't surprised at the fact that Numachi's left arm had transformed into that of a devil, something nevertheless didn't feel right.

I had the sense that the arm was slightly—shorter than the one I knew.

I'm pretty sure that when that arm had been integrated into my own, the devil part encroached on my flesh all the way to my elbow—but now that it was part of Numachi's flesh, it went no further than the wrist.

It had gotten shorter.

"Why—"

"Isn't it obvious, Kanbaru? Your first wish was granted. At that point, the devil's arm grew longer, right? Didn't you say so yourself?"

"Yeah, sure…but—"

"When I took the arm, I left behind the part of your soul that the devil had consumed. So it returned to its original size."

"The price I paid—for my first wish?"

No way. This was crazy talk.

I made a deal with a devil. That's written in stone, or blood, and it

wasn't right that I could retrieve any part of my being that had been taken away.

In the words of that manga Senjogahara-senpai is fond of, it ignored the Law of Equivalent Exchange—what, did I use the Philosopher's Stone or something?

No.

It's easy to throw around terms like "collector" and "junk man," but what did it really mean to be assembling the pieces of a "devil"?

"All right, let's get on with it, Numachi. There's a limit to how late the basketball team can be," I said, steadying my resolve. "I told you the backstory of the arm just like I promised. Now it's your turn."

Honestly, even at that point, I wanted to turn back—I intensely desired to head home without hearing her story, and to start studying for exams or something, but I steeled myself for whatever was to come.

I would see this thing through.

To the bitter end.

Otherwise, where would I ever bring down my left arm—

"Let's hear it already. What the hell happened to you in the last three years? What's been going on in your life? What have you been doing—for three whole years?"

"You really are a serious girl if you think promises are always going to be kept. Promises aren't to be kept or broken. They're to be sidestepped."

"How is that different from breaking them?"

"It's different. You're just putting them off for a while—and during that time, the promise itself becomes irrelevant. Don't you see? People can even run away from fate…and that's what my story is about."

So saying, Numachi hooked her devil hand onto the edge of the plaster cast on her left leg. Then, as though the cast were just a plain old bandage—no, as though it were toilet paper, a plain old bandage wouldn't tear that easily—she tore it in half from top to bottom.

"I should warn you, though, this is no tale. We're past the part where a basketball player has to give up her athletic career, past the page where it says 'The End.' This is just the obnoxious afterword."

Underneath the cast, her left leg was also—naturally, obviously—

A devil's leg, covered in hair.

"Forget about the arm for a second, the leg definitely looks more like a devil's than a monkey's, doesn't it?"

"…"

"Listen, though, Kanbaru. I've got more of the devil in my flesh than just these—"

022

“Okay then, where to begin? It would speed things up if we just started with that district tournament three years ago when I lost the use of my leg, but that would be a little hasty if you’re going to properly understand the complexities of my outlook on life. I’m a firm believer that haste makes waste—as you well know—and I could not care less about making things easier to understand. As you also know, Kanbaru, my playing style consists of doing everything in my power to use up time, the great equalizer.

“I would hate for you to get the impression that my accident was the source of everything—it did end my playing career, of course, and took my life in a completely different direction, but even before that I had been interested in ‘the unhappiness of others.’

“In a very different way than I am now, though.

“The complete opposite, in fact.

“Lately I’ve thrown myself into my activities as Lord Devil and so forth, searching for ‘people unhappier than me,’ but back then I was comparing ‘my happy self’ to ‘unhappy people’ and puzzling over the contrast.

“Why do I have this gift? Other people don’t seem to have this gift—like that. And by ‘this gift,’ I mean my reflexes.

“You might call it a gift for ball handling.

“Or—no, if we’re getting down to it, maybe it’s ‘excellent footwork’ that we’re talking about.

“You might think that, as an athlete, I was a one-trick basketball pony, Kanbaru—and you wouldn’t be far off. But actually, that’s not strictly true. That is, they didn’t actually have a basketball team at my elementary school.

“Just like you started out in the sprint, even though you didn’t technically belong to the track-and-field team, I started out in a different sport—in elementary school, I played soccer.

“I had a good time kicking the ball around along with the boys. Like Captain Tsubasa says: I wasn’t scared, the ball was my friend—but, sad to say, in the end my friend betrayed me.

“Friendship can be a scary thing.

“Really I just overdid it, that’s all—maybe things are different these days, but we’re talking about a long time ago here. If a girl played soccer with the boys, and on top of that, kicked their asses, they hated you for it.

“I was the queen of what you might call the Goal to Goal. They call it the Coast to Coast in basketball, right?

“All the boys in the school hated me. And if the boys all hate you then the girls all hate you too, so in those days I was public enemy number one.

“Does that sound like an exaggeration? For a kid that age, though, there’s nothing more terrifying than a ‘school without allies,’ is there? From what you’ve told me, it sounds like you’ve been there yourself.

“But being in that environment made me think. If everyone was gifted, they wouldn’t hate me. So why do there have to be people in the world with a gift, and people without?—and from there on out, I strove to keep my gift hidden. I gave up on flamboyant Goal to Goal-type plays and devoted myself to defense. I still do: my Quagmire Defense or whatever people call it is the continuation of that.

“Did my gift feel like a burden? Of course it did, no matter how I try to play it off. You must have felt the same way, Kanbaru. You seem to fancy yourself the hard-working type, but you’ve got it completely wrong. Your latent gift blossomed, that’s all—‘effort’ is nothing but a pat on the head for all the unhappy people. Look, all this is a result of our effort paying off. We’re no different from you,

we just tried a little harder, we weren't born like this, we didn't just luck out—when all the while, what we're really saying is so please don't ostracize us.

"The nail that sticks up gets hammered down—that's the traditional ceremony of human society that gifted people need to fear more than anything else. Because the world contains far more talentless, unhappy mediocrities than them. The few happy, gifted people, like I was in elementary school, will always be crushed by majority rule, no matter how great their gift.

"It's truly terrifying.

"A gift is happiness in and of itself, but by that same token it becomes unhappiness—it's only because of where I am 'now' that I can look back on that period of my life and understand.

"At the time I could only scratch my head at divine caprice. Or maybe that's when the world started to seem more diabolical than divine to me. In which case, I guess it was the caprices of the Devil I was experiencing.

"Though it's only natural for the Devil to be capricious.

"Even with that in mind, the reality is that the match is fixed from birth; the reality is that the same effort won't yield the same result; and that reality is overwhelming. It's the most deplorable thing in the world.

"The boys on my team would talk about their dreams. I don't think the J League existed back then, so they'd say, Someday I want to start in the World Cup…or something? Sure, it's a wonderful dream. But listening from the sidelines, I knew. That it would never happen. It might be possible for me, but never for them.

"I didn't just think it either, I said it, which is why they hated me. Around fifth or sixth grade I learned to keep my mouth shut.

"I say the ball was my friend, but it can't be everybody's friend—be it a soccer ball or a basketball.

"Why did I give up soccer and start playing basketball? No

particular reason. When I graduated from elementary school, I graduated from soccer as well, that's all.

"I wanted to try playing other sports. We only get one life, and it seemed like a waste to spend it devoting myself to just one thing.

"When I was recruited for a scholarship, I told them, If I can play basketball instead of soccer. At first the scout scolded me—what the hell is this kid talking about? But after I showed him what I could do for three hours, he changed his tune.

"I felt all torn up that, because I got a spot on the basketball team, there must have been a student out there who didn't. I agonized over the unfairness of talent.

"Why basketball, out of all the sports I could have chosen… I wonder. Since soccer is all about the legs, I guess maybe I wanted to try a sport where you use your hands. If there had been a handball team at my middle school, maybe I would have joined it.

"Look, I told you that footwork was my forte, right? So I thought I would try upping the difficulty level.

"From Easy to Normal.

"Yup, Normal. Basketball was pretty basic to me… Don't scowl like that, Kanbaru. If you hate it so much when people call you serious, then don't get so worked up over a little light conversation. Anyway, I figure it was because my motivation for starting basketball was so shallow that I was punished, that I lost the use of my left leg. It was the Wrath of God.

"I don't regret it, but I get it.

"I can recall that game even now.

"Or maybe not. It was three years ago, so the memory has kind of faded—time has healed that wound, I guess.

"What's that? If time heals all wounds, then it's a contradiction for me to comfort myself all these years by collecting unhappiness? Hahaha, you may be right—but wipe that smug look off your face.

It’s not such a great point that I’ll take damage from it, I won’t even flinch.

“It’s not like I think I’m absolutely right or something. I don’t think I’m wrong either, but even if I were, I wouldn’t go about things any differently. We all live with contradictions.

“Or maybe I should say we all die with contradictions. Even after death, the contradictions go on forever.

“Calling out contradictions is just childish, inelegant nitpicking.

“You should understand that, o most serious Kanbaru.

“Since no one’s more contradictory than you□no, never mind.

“Forget I said anything.

“Back to that game. First, though, would you like to know how I stood with my teammates?

“Oh, you can imagine? Yeah, you probably can. Given that I turned that prestigious team into my own personal one-man show□yeah, not a great position to be in. But even though I was the number one player on that team by any measure, the number on my uniform was always 15. Bullying in sports is insidious, isn’t it. Which is why I hate it so much when people spout nonsense about a sound mind in a sound body.

“Speaking of which, you and Higasa fit in really well with the rest of your team, didn’t you? No, just let me compliment you on that. I think it’s amazing to be able to get along with mediocrities when you’re talented. How did you kiss their asses to make that work?

“Mostly telling dirty stories and playing the lovable clown, I imagine□the unwashed masses can’t stand a wholesome hero, after all.

“I told you, don’t glare at me. You wanted me to talk, so I’m talking, obediently opening my heart to you, that’s all. Would you rather I lied? No, you want to hear the truth. Wait, you couldn’t possibly have thought that you were going to hear a ‘moving story’

from Roka Numachi, the unhappiness collector herself, the girl with a devil in her body, could you?

“If you want a nice, moving story, go read some manga or a novel. You’ll find plenty of them at a bookstore.

“What’s that? You want me to go on? Really? Okay then, here I go.

“I’ll tell you about when I wrecked my leg.

“Who was it we were playing against… I’ve actually forgotten. I’m pretty sure it was some ordinary team, not championship material or anything. Though since they managed to take me down, quite literally, I would be embarrassed if they hadn’t gone on to do well in the tournament.

“Wha? The team felt responsible for injuring me and forfeited the next game? No shit… And they were scheduled to play your team next? Wow. Well, if you say so, it must be true, but what the hell were they thinking? So stupid. Forfeiting is a dangerous ideology.

“No one is to blame for my leg getting broken but me.

“The doctor diagnosed it as a stress fracture.

“The location of the fracture sealed my fate□it wasn’t overwork that caused it, I think it happened because I neglected my cooldowns.

“People who rely entirely on innate talent end up like that all the time.

“The breaking point happened to come during a game, that’s all. It could have come during practice, or even while I was just lazing around with my legs in a foot-warmer.

“Huh? No, in my house we keep the kotatsu going all year round. Is that bad? Think they’ll start selling an air-conditioner that works the same way? They already have a heater that looks like a fan, after all. And now that they’ve got bladeless fans, an AC that works like a kotatsu ought to be next. I should pitch that idea. I wonder how much they’d buy it for? I’m getting excited just thinking about it.

“Anyway, sorry, I got off track there. Or maybe I’m actually still on track, since despite having the honor of being my team’s ace, I was a real layabout at home—I was careless with the gift that God, and the Devil, had bestowed upon me, so they got tired of waiting and took it back.

“Like, Oh, you don’t need this gift? Okay then.

“Ever since elementary school, I’d been relying entirely on my gift and pushing it too hard. My gift felt like a burden to me, so I punished it. Huh? Like my brown hair? Haha, nicely put. After all, a woman’s hair is her life, her most precious treasure. Yes, a special talent should be treated like a treasure, handled with the utmost care.

“But they forfeited, huh?

“Yeah. I mean, I get feeling some sense of responsibility when an opposing player goes down during a game—but you can just ignore that feeling and run away from that responsibility.

“The weaker they are, the more serious.

“No, maybe you can’t call such people serious. If anyone really felt responsible, they would have come to apologize to me while I was in the hospital. They only went halfway, no question about it.

“Don’t misunderstand me, I’m not saying that I hate weak people. In fact, I prefer them. Which is exactly why I wanted everyone to run away from that responsibility, to think some idiot had just fallen over on her own. To laugh at me, even.

“C’mon, it was meant to be funny, I wanna say.

“See, that’s the part you’re misunderstanding, Kanbaru. When I say ‘run away,’ you’re picturing something negative, something pessimistic, but you’re wrong.

“It takes courage to run away. Maybe more than it does to stand tall, more than it does to fight.

“…Don’t be persuaded by my little word games. Running away is

obviously cowardly. No way is it a courageous act. Still, you've got to accept your cowardice.

"This is real life, after all.

"It's fine for characters in manga or whatever to act like they despise cowardice and timidity.

"But this is real life.

"I guess you could say I wronged that other team, in some sense. Because I squandered my gift, I planted a sizable trauma in the garden of their precious middle-school hearts.

"But it's not my fault that they made it worse for themselves.

"I want to push them away saying, Not my problem.

"But if they came to me for help, I would shoulder their unhappiness as well□by the way, Kanbaru, you might not understand this since you were only pretending to be injured, but the me who went into the hospital with that stress fracture was an empty shell.

"No, no, it's all thanks to collecting unhappiness that I can strut around like this now, all free and easy. I'm human, too.

"I feel down, I get depressed.

"My feelings get hurt, I have regrets.

"I'd only taken on the challenge of playing basketball to up the difficulty level for myself, but it wasn't until after I'd lost out that I realized how much I loved that game.

"The gift that I'd treated so haphazardly was an irreplaceable treasure. I came to understand that what had felt like a burden had in fact been very precious to me.

"Yes.

"However much I'd been despised at school, however disconnected

I'd felt from my teammates, I'd been happy.

"And now I was unhappy.

"I'd become an unhappy, pitiful person.

"The funny thing is, the teammates I'd always butted heads with and the teachers who thought I was a pain in the ass all turned strangely kind and came to wish me well.

"Sorry for everything, we pushed you too hard, shit like that.

"No, I was moved, I cried. I clasped hands with those girls and we apologized to each other.

"But after they left the hospital and went home, I started wondering what the hell I was doing. Sure, I had been moved, but so what?

"Moved or not, nothing changed the fact that my left leg would never be able to stand the strain of playing sports.

"So I quit school. I didn't even want to be near it anymore, so I asked my parents if we could move, and they agreed□that is, we had moved there in the first place so I could go to that middle school, my dad had been so excited about it.

"A parent's love is an amazing thing, I guess.

"My mother was annoyed by it, though□come to think of it, she was maybe the only person who didn't say anything kind to me after my injury.

"What the hell were you thinking, didn't I tell you to take better care of your body? Now you've ruined everything□something like that? That was more or less how it went.

"Hahaha, moms are really something, aren't they?

"I'm not complaining, mind you. I really didn't want people to be kind to me at the time, I wanted them to tear me a new one.

"Thanks to my mother's criticisms, I was able to run away without

any false shows of courage or anything.

“But before all that, before we moved and before I escaped, came the event that kickstarted my habit, my bad habit, of ‘collecting unhappiness.’

“It was a teammate of mine, who came to visit me in the hospital. She showed me the path I should take. I really owe her my gratitude.

“We weren’t close, of course. Quite the opposite. We’d hardly ever spoken before that.

“Her name? I don’t remember. I called my teammates by their numbers, not their names, same as with my senseis.

“I feel like it was some ordinary, average name, but I also feel like maybe it wasn’t—which is to say, it’s the kind of info that we could easily do without. I won’t give her an alias either, it would just make things more complicated.

“Once I was myself again after people visited me and gave me their sympathy, I’d feel shell-shocked. I didn’t mind it while it was going on, though. After all, people saying kind things to you doesn’t feel terrible, which is why I was happy when that girl suddenly showed up by herself to see me in my hospital room. But to my surprise, she wasn’t there to offer any sympathy.

“She was there to ask me for advice.

“After some perfunctory get-well nonsense, she dove right in and said, ‘Can I get your advice about something?’

“It was all typical middle-school-girl stuff. One of the girls in her class did this, some boy she liked did that, that kind of thing. Unlike her name, I remember exactly what it was she asked me about—it’s Item #00 in my collection, after all—but out of respect for her privacy, I won’t get into the details.

“Typical middle-school-girl issues.

“I’ll just say that it wasn’t far off from whatever you might be

imagining, Kanbaru, having been a middle school girl yourself.

“What I really want you to try to imagine right now, Kanbaru, is my psychological state at the time. Sure, I may have brought it on myself, but when I broke my leg it upended my entire life, even if that had only been fifteen years at that point. So why the hell is this kid opening up to me? What’s she up to? That’s what I thought.

“I assumed her story would end up having something to do with me, with my future, but it never did. Well, what could I tell her? She wanted my advice, but whatever I might say, I’d devoted my entire life to playing sports and didn’t know a damn thing about being madly in love.

“And with a broken leg, how could I solve the problems of a typical middle school girl? I thought to myself—she chose the lousiest possible person to come to for advice.

“But that wasn’t the case.

“After she’d given me her spiel, I tried my level best to be sincere, but in the end all I could manage was some muddled nonsense. When visiting hours were over, the girl went home. That night I kind of beat myself up about it, feeling guilty that I hadn’t been able to give her a decent answer, scolding myself that she’d never come visit me again—but she came back the very next day. Crazy, right?

“Not to visit me. She wanted my advice.

“And she just repeated the same stuff she’d told me the day before—I’d felt bad during the night, but having to listen to the same stories two days in a row, stories that had nothing to do with me, I got bored.

“I’m sure she’s having a hard time, but why should I be filling my mind with her problems? I’ve got my hands full worrying about my own future—that’s what I thought.

“And when I did, everything became clear to me. Perfectly clear.

“She hadn’t chosen the wrong person to come to for advice. I wasn’t

the lousiest choice; as far as she was concerned, I was the best possible choice.

“Because she wanted advice from someone who was clearly less happy and fortunate than herself. Yes, from someone like me, for instance—someone whose life seemed like it was basically over.

“Do you understand what we’re dealing with here, my dear, serious Kanbaru?

“No, it’s not a riddle. As proof, I’ll give you the answer right now.

“Let me spell it out for you: that girl may have had worries, may have had troubles, but she didn’t want to be pitied. It was the same as it was for me, with my broken leg, feeling annoyed by everybody’s kindness.

“She had troubles, but she didn’t want some kind of holier-than-thou advice from on high—so she came to me, who clearly seemed to be lower than her, afflicted as I was with grave concerns that the average middle school girl didn’t have to deal with.

“The psychology of it is easy to comprehend.

“I mean, it’s no different from you acting the clown and getting your teammates’ support because of it. Stars and heroes will never be embraced if they don’t have foibles that allow the masses to feel even superior to them. The logic is more or less the same. Pretty much every teenager basks in the satisfaction of finding fault with great historical figures.

“But just because I understood where she was coming from doesn’t mean it didn’t piss me off. I was angry more at myself than at her, though. Would you look at that, there goes Roka Numachi. Another one bites the dust. I was pissed at myself for being looked down on by teammates whose names I didn’t even remember, for being solicited for advice I was totally unqualified to give.

“Huh? Why didn’t I get angry at her when I realized what was going on?

“Well, because she’d gotten one thing very wrong. She assumed that

someone like me who'd broken her leg and lost all prospects of an athletic career, who'd never take to the court again, who had to give up on school and was at her absolute nadir□wouldn't look down on her, wouldn't pity her.

"But she was wrong.

"Because listening to everything she had to say was such a consolation.

"Other people's misery is like sweet nectar. And that didn't change a bit, even after I'd broken my leg. The thought that I've got big problems, but so do other people was a balm for my wounded soul. I could tell it was warming my heart.

"I'll admit upfront that I didn't recognize what was going on with my own psychology until I understood what was going on with hers□I believed that, in my own way, I was dispensing earnest advice.

"My god, humans are ugly creatures.

"Licking each other's wounds, comparing and contrasting their misery. But man, things got fun after I figured that out. I investigated how to draw out her pain and suffering most effectively from every angle, then put my findings into action. I suppose you could say those were the salad days of Lord Devil.

"I devoured that girl's troubles, telling myself all the while how despicable I was□but also feeling the first hints of salvation.

"I couldn't just listen and leave it at that, though, so as she was leaving that day, I said, 'I understand your problems.' It wasn't a lie. And I went on□'I'll take care of everything, so you don't need to worry anymore.'

"That part was a lie. A massive lie. I was in the hospital and had no idea what was going to become of myself, let alone anyone else. How the hell was I going to solve whatever problems befell her at a school that I'd already decided to leave?

"And it wasn't a kindly lie, told with her feelings in mind. I told it

because I'd already thoroughly plumbed the depths of her problems and couldn't stand the thought of her coming back the next day and rehashing them for me a third time. It was a selfish lie. A self-centered lie.

"…Come on now, that's not fair. Don't forget that what she did was pretty insensitive in the first place. Anyone else probably would have shouted her out of the room. So even though it wasn't a kindly lie, I'd argue that I was extending her a courtesy.

"She looked puzzled, like something didn't sit quite right, but nevertheless she said thank you and went home. What the hell was she thankful for? Anyway, I thought what I did had been in pretty poor taste, even if I did feel some hint of salvation, and that night I busied myself with worthless remorse, telling myself I'd never do it again.

"But after some time—I'm pretty sure it was right before I was discharged from the hospital, a surprising thing happened. She visited my room for a third time.

"She had the revitalized look of someone who'd been possessed by a spirit and was finally free from its influence. This time when she said 'Thank you!' she was smiling from ear to ear.

"She was in such high spirits that I could barely make sense of anything she said, but I got the gist that her problems had been successfully resolved.

"She kept saying, 'Thank you so much, it's all thanks to you!' But I hadn't done a thing, how could I? I'd just been lying in my hospital bed like a rock the whole time.

"This is my clear, easy-to-understand example illustrating that 'time heals all wounds.' Even if she didn't swallow everything I said to her, she seemed to trust me at least halfway—enough that she entrusted her worries to me, and once she stopped worrying herself, the problems went and took care of themselves.

"The girl in her class had blah blah blah, the boy she liked was blah blah blah—and I guess maybe her feelings about everything also just

cooled off a little as time passed.

“Either way, whatever spirit that had been possessing her was gone.

“I guess you could say a devil had been exorcised—and her worries now existed only within me.

“Excusing her leave-taking, I told her, ‘Come on, there’s no need to thank me. I just did what anyone would do.’ She probably took that as an expression of my humility, but the fact is that since she had no more troubles, I simply didn’t need her anymore.

“And the whole thing came into focus.

“Try thinking it through for yourself, Kanbaru.

“I had relished listening to her problems. And it had helped ease my pain. As for her, not only had she been able to ask me for advice without a second thought now that she felt superior to me, she had liberated herself from worry by entrusting her problems to me, and time—or from her perspective, I—had even seen fit to take care of those problems.

“Right, everybody wins, nobody loses.

“Or rather, everyone finds salvation.

“What is it again, the Pareto Optimum? Or the Nash Equilibrium—whichever.

“Two birds with one stone: I help people, and it eases my pain—not to mention that the cost performance can’t be beat.

“So it didn’t take me long to make up my mind. I wasn’t possessed of either the conscience or the morals to worry about it—and I do mean worry about it—for even a single night. I may very well have had them before I broke my leg, but if I did, they shattered along with the bone.

“I decided to make collecting unhappiness my reason for living from then on. No, ‘reason for living’ makes it sound too sunny. It was more like I’d found a place where I could lay my life as an

athlete to rest. Yeah, I decided to make it my gravestone.

“And so, the Unhappiness Collector.

“Roka Numachi, the misfortune-picker, was born.”

023

Listening to Numachi's story put me in a heavy funk. She kept talking about the relief she got from hearing other people's tales of misery, but listening to hers didn't give me even an iota of relief.

I felt instead like I'd suddenly been loaded down with a profoundly heavy burden.

However she might phrase it, deriving enjoyment from hearing about other people's unhappiness was in poor taste, a perverse predilection, I thought.

I mean, sure, pity-bragging plus schadenfreude is symbiotic, mutually beneficial, more than it's killing two birds with one stone, but life is never that obliging.

Or maybe it is?

Didn't she keep on collecting precisely because it had gone so well?

Sometimes life is unexpectedly obliging.

Hadn't she collected my arm as well

Precisely because her way of thinking was correct?

While I was choked with tears of joy when my beastly left arm returned to normal I also felt like that was a totally different story.

Just because I want them to be different, though, doesn't mean they actually are…

The girl in question really did seem to have been saved thanks to Numachi. She said she didn't actually do anything, but just by listening she gave that girl peace of mind salvation enough for

anyone, you might say.

But I just couldn't let it go.

Even if Numachi wasn't doing anything wrong, I simply couldn't accept that the way she went about things was right.

And□

"That was quite the autobiography, but…the story's not over, is it, Numachi?"

"Hm?"

She cocked her head in mock puzzlement, which really irritated me, but I suppressed that feeling and continued with all the patience I could muster.

"Now I know how you began collecting unhappiness. And I understand your motivation, which is a hell of a motivation, by the way. Benefitting directly from your interests, and helping other people in the bargain. I'd even call it admirable."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you."

"But it's only half the story," I ignored her heckling. "I understand why you collect unhappiness, but you still haven't told me how you came to be collecting the pieces of a devil."

"I was just about to get to that. But first, let's take a halftime break. I was thinking maybe I should give you a choice."

"A choice?"

Something about the way she said it, the way she talked, really got on my nerves.

But that itself was kind of mysterious□why did I find Numachi so vexing?

And why, when I found her so vexing.

Did I want to keep interacting with her?

What the hell was she to me? It wasn't as if I wanted her to return the monkey's paw my mother had left me.

I didn't need Kaiki to tell me that I should be pleased to get rid of the thing, to pass it off to the junk collector who'd come for that purpose. I was having a hard time accepting the sudden happiness that had fallen into my lap, but did that give me permission to get inside Numachi's head?

"What do you mean, a choice? Are we talking about Easy, Normal, and Hard again? You telling me I need to choose how you're going to talk about this?"

"No, no, nothing so fancy this time. Just the simple choice: do you want to hear what comes next, or not."

Numachi completely ignored my mounting irritation and continued the conversation very much at her own pace.

Lackadaisically.

But listening to her talk really was a test of my forbearance.

Or maybe of simple fortitude.

Conversing with her was exhausting.

I felt my energy draining away though that wasn't why she offered me that choice, of course.

This is what she said:

"What comes next is a truly devilish tale. I think it's probably best for you not to hear it, if you can stand that. You can still just return to a normal life. And I think you should just go back to making friends and falling in love, reading books and playing with your cell phone."

"Give me a break, Numachi. I'm not the one who has to choose, you are. You're the one with a simple choice to make: are you going to

tell me the whole story, or are you going to give me back that devil's hand?"

"Ooh, I'm so scared."

My words had ended up tinged with a threatening tone, and Numachi trembled in mock fright.

She didn't miss a beat, huh?

"I'll tell you, then. About the beginning of my affair with a devil□I warn you, though, that hearing this particular tale of unhappiness is not going to make anyone feel better."

I muttered, "Too late now."

024

“I’m probably the last person you want to hear this from, but you’re into some pretty weird shit—at the same time, though, I get why you want to know everything.

“This is the first time I’ve actually told the whole story to someone, so I don’t know if I can do it justice. That is—I have actually told the part about how I started collecting unhappiness before.

“And it’s not that I haven’t wanted to tell someone the rest of it, the part about the devil I mean, it’s just that no one has wanted to hear it.

“So anyway, thanks to that girl who came to me in the hospital for advice, I began to ‘collect unhappiness.’ And my system has been more or less the same since the beginning—though it wasn’t as polished at first, of course.

“That’s right, at first I started with the people close to me. Right before I left school, I started out by using my classmates and my juniors as guinea pigs—‘guinea pigs’ leaves a bad impression, doesn’t it? Am I making myself sound too evil? I really was ‘dispensing advice,’ after all, so I shouldn’t make it sound so much like I was running a con.

“Fortuitously, I guess you could say, that first girl laid the groundwork for me. She’d already spread the word about how multitalented I was. Ah, multitalented indeed. She may well have been the one behind that overblown sales pitch about me solving any problem without fail or whatever.

“In that case I am definitely an ingrate, forgetting her name and everything.

“How utterly shameful.

“Then again, at the time I didn’t have the leeway to feel grateful towards her. And by leeway I mean emotional leeway. I can just talk about it now, but back then I was pretty down in the dumps.

“…No, it was a little bit later on that I bleached my hair like this. But, Kanbaru, how did you manage to compete in the nationals with a value system that equates dyed-brown hair with being a miscreant? There must be all kinds of weirdoes at the nationals.

“Anyway, that’s how I was feeling. Since I’d already decided to change schools, I thought of my collecting during that period as a sort of severance package, the icing on the cake, and I may have been a little rough in the way I went about it—that’s my self-diagnosis.

“I’m kind of embarrassed about it—I wish I’d been more careful about how I gathered up their unhappiness. Fate had brought us to the same school, all in all.

“Though I guess the ‘overfishing’ I did at that time helped me perfect my technique, in the end.

“They all very kindly consulted with me—of course. I say ‘of course’ because it seems that anyone and everyone will speak freely to someone who’s clearly unhappier than they are.

“They hemorrhaged pretty intense secrets to me.

“I didn’t quite have the hang of it yet, so I took on a few burdens that were a little too heavy for me, but we’ll just let that go.

“I don’t really know how things went for those girls afterwards, but when I wound up our conversation with ‘I’m on it. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of all your problems,’ they looked so relieved. Like everything had already been taken care of. That first girl must have put around some really convincing rumors about me. It was like those words were a magic spell.

“Makes you laugh, doesn’t it? For me, they were about as meaningful as saying good morning to a stranger on the street.

“I thought at the time that maybe I just had it all wrong. That other

people's misery was only like sweet nectar to me because my mind had gotten so weak during my time in the hospital. Maybe after I was discharged and was counseling people in a slightly calmer state, I'd feel a little chastened.

"I had the faint desire to believe that I wasn't the kind of scumbag who'd rejoice in the unhappiness of others—I was so naïve back then.

"But in the blink of an eye that naïveté went up in a puff of smoke.

"The notion that someone who's been wounded becomes kinder or that someone in pain understands others' pain is outrageously false. The girls who came to me for advice probably came to the conclusion that I, aloof as I had been at school, had turned over a new leaf because of my injury and decided to help people as a result. But oops, I'd done more than turn over a new leaf; I'd gone over to the dark side.

"Because I had come to know pain, I wanted to know their pain—though of course I was the only one who was aware of that. From an outside perspective, everything was as it appeared to be, I was just offering those girls advice and nothing more.

"But nothing is as it appears to be in this world. Like, just because someone is wearing a bandage doesn't mean they're injured, right? If I were to try and find a lesson in that—but now I'm starting to sound like that swindler.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll tell you all about my dealings with Kaiki. I have no intention of pulling one over on you, of pulling the wool over your eyes. At this point, I intend to tell you everything. Think of it as payment for the devil's arm. But if at some point you decide that you've heard enough, do say so, I insist.

"It wasn't until a little later on that I met Kaiki, so for now let's stay with the part before I changed schools, when I had just begun my collection. The thing I realized back then was that I had to be careful about giving out advice. I'm human, after all, so when someone tells me their problems I think, You could just solve them by doing x, y, or z. But it was when I voiced those thoughts that the

girls would look skeptical.

“Offended, even.

“I mean, they’d come to me for help, but when they actually got advice from this injured, miserable person they looked down on, it rubbed them the wrong way they’d suddenly clam up, and I had a hell of a time getting them talking again.

“It’s even simpler than ‘talking about your problems will make you feel better.’ They just wanted to talk, period. By the way, I did a little experimenting and discovered another way of dealing with your problems: write them down on paper, like you’re keeping a diary.

“Turning your intractable, insoluble problems over and over in your head just drags you down, but getting them out in a form where you can see them objectively seems to do a surprisingly good job of relieving the burden.

“Because ‘thinking’ about something is really just ‘remembering’ it. It’s an illusion that if you keep thinking about a hopeless problem, eventually you’ll arrive at a solution. Our brains are electrical impulses, so what we call ideas or thoughts are nothing but momentary sparks.

“Worrying, and thinking, are really just like taking a timeout. There’s the saying that ‘poor thinking is like sleeping,’ but the fact is that any thinking is like sleeping.

“Quit thinking. Don’t think. Suspend thought. That’s the way to resolve your worries; that’s what my experiment convinced me of.

“I said it before, but I don’t know how things went for those girls afterwards. I have no clue. I realized that giving out the wrong advice or scheduling a follow-up visit would be counterproductive and in fact strip me of my magical powers, so I never confirmed how effective it had been for them.

“But at the very least I can state with confidence that no one’s situation got worse because of me. It was my policy even back then

that when someone came to me with a problem that I thought was genuinely serious, I would send them to someone who could help them.

“In any event, the experiment was a success.

“A great success.

“So I left the middle school where I’d spent nearly three years of my life with a self-satisfied look on my face□but I would have to wait a little bit longer before I could become a full-fledged collector.

“I realize that sounds kind of over the top, but the simple fact is that first I had to turn my mind to rehabilitating my leg.

“Rehabilitation for an injury is a lifelong process. There’s no moment where you say, ‘My God, it’s healed!’ like in a manga□oh, but I guess there was for Senjogahara, wasn’t there? Glad to hear it.

“I didn’t have it so easy, though. I was constantly visiting the rehabilitation center near our new house. And rehab was grueling, lemme tell you. I thought it would kill me. At the time I wished it would.

“I wanted to exploit other people’s unhappiness to make it easier on myself, but we’re talking about a hospital here. Even I’m not crazy enough to go after the misfortunes of people who’re stuck in such a place. I told you before, didn’t I? I’m not into anything too miserable.

“Yeah, I guess the criterion is more or less that I wash my hands of any story that’s clearly unhappier than my own. I don’t always get my wish, though, which is to say, it’s kind of a wishy-washy standard.

“It’s sad though, I guess it’s the fate of an athlete, even a retired one, to be unable to act unless the rules are clear.

“I barely attended the public middle school I had transferred into because I was spending all my time going to rehab, but I did graduate eventually.

“I didn’t bother with high school entrance exams.

“I mean, ever since elementary school I’d put all my energy into sports, and I hadn’t studied at all. I was never going to get into high school, but I’d also lost sight of the point of going in the first place. So I think it’s fair to say that I chose not to go to high school of my own volition.

“Which doesn’t mean I found a job.

“My left leg hadn’t recovered to the point that I could work—in fact, it would never be the same again. The doctor told me I’d have to keep this cast and crutch for the rest of my life, so—yeah, that really brought me down.

“I guess it was when I got that news that I decided to dye my hair. Since I wasn’t an athlete anymore. I always thought it was a stylish look, but I suppose to other people it just seemed like I was going down the wrong path.

“Fair enough, I did go down the wrong path. Straight down into the dumps.

“But that doctor also told me to get myself out of the house as much as possible, and his words of encouragement were priceless. In terms of working on my collection, it became a great excuse to give my parents.

“And so at last we come to the founding of Lord Devil, Inc.—the name I used at first wasn’t Lord Devil, of course, but I think at this point it would just confuse you if I started throwing around other names. Anyway, it was definitely the precursor to Lord Devil, so we’ll just leave it at that.

“I stayed away from my own town. And by my own town, I mean the place we had moved to—whatever, the point is that I decided to engage in my activities as a collector outside of my own territory.

“This was a lesson I’d learned at the experimental stage. It was better for my identity to remain hidden. The more they could feel like the advice was coming from a neutral third party, the more

relaxed and comfortable the clients would be—because no matter how much they looked down on me, there was no guarantee that I would keep my mouth shut. The old adage that a close neighbor is better than a distant relative is true in its own way, but when push comes to shove, it's best to ask a distant stranger for advice.

"What's that? You thought the town I moved to was around here? Not a chance, that would be ridiculous. If I established myself in nowheresville, people would eventually figure out who I was no matter how many times I changed my name.

"Lord Devil's identity needs to remain secret—it increases my divine powers. Or my diabolical powers, really, but that doesn't have the same ring to it.

"Your reaction said it all: there was nothing I could do to keep from standing out in a town like this with my hair dyed brown.

"Which is why I constantly change my base of operations—you want to know where I moved to? I'd rather not say, if it's all the same to you. If you were thinking of sending me a Christmas card or something, you can just hold off.

"And I've already changed my cell number, in case you were wondering. I'll tell you right now, Kanbaru, this will be the last time we see each other, and the last time we speak. So if there's anything you want to say to me, this is your big chance, let it all out.

"When I tell you that I stay away from my home town to do this—I'm curious, how big of an area do you picture, Kanbaru? At most, what, one prefecture? You're way off. I operate throughout the country.

"From Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south.

"I've planted my flag in every prefecture over the course of the past three years. My, my, everyone must think I'm on a little journey of self-discovery before I pull myself together and move on with my life.

“They say that travel heals a broken heart, don’t they?

“Though my broken heart and my journey are embarrassingly inconsequential compared to your senpai’s since middle school, Hanekawa. Then again, I win insofar as I have a clearly defined goal and she doesn’t.

“Haha, yeah, I’ve heard about what Hanekawa’s been up to. Just like I heard about your left arm—you guys are famous. When I established myself in this town, I heard a bunch of names that were a real blast from the past. I’ve forgotten the names of my old teammates and teachers and everyone, but you and Hanekawa and Senjogahara, I remembered.

“And.

“Koyomi Araragi, of course.

“To tell the truth, I knew all along. I’ve just been playing dumb.

“But it wasn’t when I came to this town that I first heard the name Koyomi Araragi, it was after I changed schools. It was a name I hadn’t heard back when I was absorbed in playing sports—I guess he’s that kind of guy, in other words.

“But I digress. Don’t look so suspicious.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand. This goes without saying, but my clearly defined goal is collecting unhappiness. Since I’m a collector, I want to get my hands on as many kinds as possible, so it’s only natural that I should target the entire country. The truth is that I’d like to target the whole world if possible, like Hanekawa, but unfortunately I don’t speak any languages other than Japanese. I can’t match up to a brainiac like her on that score.

“Huh? You don’t think a high school girl can travel around the country gathering unhappiness?

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m not a high school girl.

“Sure, there have been plenty of times where it seemed like I was going to get nabbed by DSS—but listen, with time and money,

there's not much a person can't accomplish.

"When you don't go to high school, suddenly you've got all this time on your hands. The only reason people don't leave their locale is because they've got school, or work, or a loving family by their side—without all that, people are free to go wherever they want. It's the ones who say they can't be tied down who turn out to be looking for a place to call home.

"Money? Right. No, it's not like I worked for it or anything. The pain isn't so bad now, but when I first started traveling it was chronic, and severe. I kept a stiff upper lip, though.

"Why has the pain abated? I think you can guess, but I'll get to that later. Simply put, with my left leg being a devil's and all, my injury has in a certain sense healed.

"More changed than healed, you might say.

"Are my parents rich? Well, much as I appreciate that they left me to my own devices, unfortunately they're resolutely middle class. I'm not you, Kanbaru.

"…Hm? Everybody knows how rich you are. You live in a mansion, don't you? For all the stupid spending you've done, no one seems to be particularly envious of you.

"The world goes easy on idiots and clowns. It's accounted a much graver sin for an eminent person to commit a crime than for a reckless fool to do the same, yes? Though demanding that eminent people also have excellent character clearly goes well beyond the bounds of noblesse oblige.

"'A sound mind in a sound body' doesn't hold true, and neither does 'a great soul with a great mind,' it seems.

"To let the cat out of the bag: insurance.

"My legs had been insured, against injuries.

"I don't know about your middle school, but mine offered such a plan.

“At a hell of a premium. My tuition was waived, but that we had to pay. When my mother said I ruined everything, that investment was probably part of what she meant, but it did yield a huge return.

“It was my parents who’d shelled out that money in the first place, so that return was theirs by right, but they didn’t stop me from taking it and throwing it around by the fistful, like a bandit queen. Maybe they just couldn’t?

“That money’ll run out someday, of course, and at that point I’ll have to find some other way of raising funds—but the point is, the source of the start-up capital for Lord Devil was none other than my broken leg.

“It didn’t go all that well at first, but bit by bit I figured out how to get the word out in unfamiliar towns, and how to go about my consultations.

“I wonder if I’m talented in that regard. I’m of the opinion that talent is everything, so the answer would have to be yes, but maybe this is a special case. The desperation of the wounded animal to survive must have contributed to some degree.

“It’s the theory of evolution.

“Fail, run away, get sloppy, get caught, get exposed, apologize, deceive, talk my way out of it—through endless repetition, I figured out my system.

“The system you’re familiar with.

“By this point, I’m sure oh-so-clever Kanbaru has figured out how I came to meet Deishu Kaiki. Right, eventually I horned in on his territory.

“There are similarities between his cons and my hobby, after all—my activities aren’t commercial, but in terms of methodology, you could say we’re essentially in the same business.

“I want to make it clear that I don’t approve of his cons—abusing his knowledge of charms to take money from innocent people, I mean, come on. There sure are some bad apples in the world.

“But we can’t ignore the fact that some people have also been saved by his actions.

“I agree that the inevitable victimization that results from his work, unlike mine, is unacceptable, but then charms are just ineffective for most people.

“Oh, were any of your friends affected? I get why you would be pissed in that case, but at the same time, you should try and understand.

“There’s no such thing as universal evil.

“Every evil also brings some salvation.

“Every evil, and every devil.

“On the flipside, all justice hurts someone they say there are no absolutes in this world, and that includes absolute right and absolute wrong.

“War engenders great inventions, and disasters bring about economic benefits. It’s always been that way. The words ‘good and evil’ can easily be replaced by ‘profit and loss.’

“But all of that being said, it’s not like I found a kindred spirit in Kaiki. We had a little disagreement, so we decided to share information so as not to step on each other’s toes, that’s all.

“Because, while we might be in the same business, his way of doing things was inconvenient for me, and vice versa.

“He’s a reasonable guy, in his own way.

“He just wants to make a buck, so he knows how to make a deal.

“Now, in addition to learning that there was this guy named Kaiki, there were a few other things I learned at that point. Got a guess? Right, charms and aberrations.

“As an expert in the field, Deishu Kaiki told me about the existence of these aberrations. No, he doesn’t believe in ghosts himself, so

more precisely he told me about the theory that they exist□but.

“That’s a little bit of foreshadowing.

“It foreshadows how I turned my hand more broadly to assembling a ‘devil.’

“How long was it since I started my collection? As someone who still goes to school you might not understand, Kanbaru, but when you’re not tied to any such organization, the calendar starts to lose its meaning. Monday runs into Sunday runs into Friday, and January, February, December, they’re all the same. It’s like you start to tell the season by the rotation of the menu at McDonald’s. Very cultured, I know. In a contemporary way. The point is, I don’t know precisely how much time had passed, I can’t remember. But it had been at least a year, I think.

“I don’t actually number my collection, so I have no idea what number this particular girl was. I was well over a hundred, but not yet up to two hundred, somewhere in there.

“Sorry to be so vague, I know I promised to tell you the whole truth.

“But one thing is for sure. That girl□Roka Hanadori was her name□was #01 in my Devil Collection. She was a high school student in my town, so she was probably older than me, though I never asked.

“Yeah, I remember her name.

“It made such an intense impression on me that I blurted it out just now despite my usual dedication to privacy□and yes, it’s partially because our first names are read the same way, but that’s not the only reason.

“Her name means a blossom on a high tower, while mine means a wax flower□quite a difference, eh? Plus her family name uses the characters for ‘flowers’ and ‘birds’ as opposed to my ‘swamp’? Enough to make you jealous, for sure.

“But the issues she was dealing with completely dispelled any such

envy or petty jealousy.

“…I’m telling you this because it’s an integral part of the story, but keep it to yourself. And stop prying into Hanadori’s life. It goes against my professional ethics. Given that it’s not technically my profession, I could turn a blind eye to any indiscretions if I had to, of course, but I have my pride.

“Let’s say it was in a certain town. This story takes place in a town where I’d set up shop and was doing my Lord Devil thing when Hanadori showed up.

“By then I had started using my Easy, Normal, Hard filter and she chose Hard. She came to see me, face to face. You know what I thought then?

“Yup… Damn, it might be time to close up shop in this town. The fewer Hard-mode clients, the better. When their issues are grave, the root of the problem remains whether or not I succeed. Sometimes I can’t say, ‘leave it to me,’ even as a lie. Not to mention the fact that when Hanadori came to me, she looked like she’d been to hell and back five times already.

“Even my leg didn’t faze her one bit. I was wearing the cast and using the crutch to flaunt my ‘weakness’ and make myself seem easier to talk to.

“She came to me and pleaded, ‘Help me…’ Of course, I immediately started trying to decide who to pass her off to. Was this a matter for the police? Or child-protective services?

“But that calculation went out the window in the blink of an eye.

“She was wearing track pants under the skirt of her school uniform. Baggy ones exactly like the ones I’m wearing now.

That winter you saw a lot of girls sporting that fashion, so at the time I just assumed she was being trendy. But now that I think about it, was it even winter? Maybe the very tail end? Either way, she wasn’t wearing those track pants under her skirt to protect against the cold. She took them off in front of me.

“You know what’s coming, right?

“Her leg was a devil’s.

“Yup, this leg. Hairy, tough, too unbalanced to be attached to a girl this leg.

“But it wasn’t the state of her leg that Hanadori was upset about.

“‘This leg,’ she said. ‘This leg is trying to kill my mother, all on its own.’

“I’ll give you the gist of her story, but don’t pay attention to the details and just forget it all afterwards, okay? Please. There was a college student she was planning her future with, and if that was all then no big deal, it happens all the time, but she said she was pregnant with his child. Maybe that happens all the time too. And I guess it happens all the time like it did with her, that her parents, dead set against it, told her to have an abortion.

“Happens so often that it might as well be the plot of a cellphone novel but just because it happens all the time doesn’t mean it isn’t tragic.

“Me? I wanted nothing to do with it, obviously. I mean, holy cow! People had come to me with some pretty serious problems before that, but hers took the cake. No contest.

“The hospital is probably where you should be, I thought, but she was probably seeing a doctor already… And her case wasn’t covered by my ‘time heals all wounds’ warranty.

“Pregnancy wasn’t something that just went away over time.

“In fact, it would only get worse.

“The truth is that I was at a loss. Why is she opening up to me about this heavyweight shit? It’s not the kind of thing you go to some urban legend of a consultation service for… But like I said. The stuff that ‘happens all the time’ that she shared with me was just a preamble.

“She’d never swallowed the rumor, of course—but it seemed like her back was definitely against the wall. She didn’t want to snuff out a new life, but she also wasn’t old enough to be a mother, her own mother was all over her about it, the man she was building her life around wasn’t being helpful—so.

“So she turned to a devil instead.

“She wished on a mummified left leg—just like you wished on that mummified left hand.

“I never got to ask how she came to be in possession of such a thing. It was my first exposure to any of it, so what can you do? Such a waste, though. Which is exactly why I hope to get it out of you this time—I think maybe she said it was a keepsake from her father or something? She mentioned living alone with her mom… heheh. I guess she was doing that much better than you, having one parent, at least. Not that I explicitly heard her say her dad was dead or anything. Still, it must have been because of that family situation that her mother was so concerned about her daughter and so harsh with her.

“What’s good, what’s bad?

“The world is a complete mystery to me.

“Maybe her father was somebody, like your mother. It’s a possibility, anyway. Either way—she must have had some grounding in that stuff to wish upon a devil.

“And to become a devil.

“You probably know better than anyone, but this devil is really a monstrous creature that grants its owner’s wishes in a negative form. And for sure, on the surface Hanadori’s problem would be solved by her mother’s death. It could also be solved by the death of the boyfriend, or of the child in her belly—what’s it called again, an Elektra Complex? All sons curse their fathers, and all daughters despise their mothers—maybe mom was just the one within kicking range.

“There are plenty of possible interpretations, and I don’t know which one is correct. In any event, she made a wish, and the devil decided to grant it by possessing Hanadori’s leg—and bumping off her mother.

“It failed. Late at night, in a trance, Hanadori kicked the shit out of her mother as she lay sleeping, but in the end it wasn’t enough to kill her.

“Because in her case, Kanbaru, it was her leg that had been imbued with power, not her arm. Even though she kicked her mother with the leg, she couldn’t keep her balance while she was doing it, so her mother wasn’t hurt that badly.

“In which case, Araragi’s lucky to be alive, isn’t he? What is he, immortal or something?

“Hanadori quickly realized that she herself was the culprit who’d put her mother in the hospital. I mean, it was basically what she had wished for, plus her leg had turned into a beast’s leg, so it didn’t take a rocket scientist to reach that conclusion—and so she was stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea.

“If her wish couldn’t be granted, her leg would stay like that forever. But granting the wish meant killing her mother. She could commit suicide instead, but that would also mean killing the baby inside her. And of course she couldn’t ask her boyfriend for advice—she didn’t want him to see her with that leg.

“So she came to me.

“Grasping at straws. Then again, she’d brought it on herself, so maybe she was grasping at a voodoo doll.

“But I felt like I understood why she’d seek out an urban legend for help—an urban legend like Lord Devil. A realistic problem like pregnancy is one thing, but in terms of dealing with an aberration-related problem like a devil, I was the perfect counselor.

“I wasn’t called Lord Devil at the time, but that kind of eeriness had been a necessary part of the staging. It was that darkness that must

have drawn her to me. Like a moth to a flame.

“I’ll ask you the same question I asked earlier. Do you know what I thought then? What I, a collector of unhappiness, thought after she told me all this?

“…Wrong. You’re completely off base. How did you manage to hold your team together when you don’t understand people at all?

“I thought, I want to help this girl.

“I’m not lying, I really did. For the first time in my life I genuinely wanted to help someone.

“I get why you don’t believe me. I am without question the lowest of the low. I’m the kind of person who listens to people’s problems, and then does nothing; I just leave them in the lurch. The kind of person who eases her pain with others’ misfortunes. Still, where do you get off calling my desire to help someone a lie?

“Like I said earlier, the masses love a celebrity scandal. But anyone with a lick of sense understands that one shameless little blot marring an otherwise sterling career doesn’t render the rest of the career null and void. The indiscretion of one’s twilight years doesn’t cancel out the glories of youth.

“In the same way, you can’t dismiss the sentiment of a delinquent who shares an umbrella with a stray dog. When a typically bad person does some tiny bit of good, it looks better than it would otherwise sure, that may be true, but it doesn’t mean that you can completely dismiss how the delinquent boy couldn’t bear to leave a soaking-wet dog to its fate.

“No one is all good.

“No one is all bad.

“Just because a cool hero collects dirty books, or an otherwise ideal woman is bad at the multiplication tables, nobody would say that negates all of their positive attributes.

“People want to whittle others down to a single aspect of their

character, but things aren't that simple. It's only parents who see children as children, and it's only children who see parents as parents. When your title changes, who you are changes too, and who you are also changes depending on who you're interacting with.

"Who you are changes with the passage of time.

"A devil can be angelic too—even if only for a moment.

"I'm the lowest of the low, but not always. I wanted to do something to help Hanadori.

"I wanted to take her place, if I could.

"Did I sympathize with her because we shared a first name?

"Did I want her to pull her life together where I'd failed?

"Not really. That wouldn't add up. What I felt was a purely chivalrous desire to help her out.

"Pure chivalry. I won't deny that I was more surprised than anyone to find such an urge inside me.

"But, all that being said, what could I do?

"I was a self-proclaimed treasure hunter on a long journey of self-discovery. I'd become well versed in other people's unhappiness in the course of my activities, but I was an expert on its myriad variations, not on what to do about it. Never mind the fact that her problems, be it the pregnancy or the devil's leg, surpassed anything else in my collection.

"Even if I mobilized all the knowledge at my command, it would do no good. I was just some person who'd been brought up in a laissez-faire spiral of indulgence, growing up in a world of athletics totally divorced from anything having to do with men—our names were the same, but the lives we'd led were nothing alike.

"There was nothing I could say that would get through to her, mean anything to her. So I didn't say anything at all.

“Not a word.

“I just hugged her.

“Roka Numachi, embracing Roka Hanadori.

“I hugged her without a word.

“Gently? Nope, firmly, forcefully, vigorously.

“I’m pretty sure I was the one who was crying. Maybe I shouldn’t have hugged a pregnant girl so forcefully, even if it was still her first trimester, but I wasn’t thinking.

“And then I spoke.

“What I said—I, who had nothing to say—was something I’d said over and over again, so many times before.

“It’s okay.

“I’ll take care of everything.

“I’ll solve your problems, without fail.

“So you don’t need to worry anymore—those were the irresponsible words I whispered into her ear.

“Not just once, but over and over again, so many times—I must’ve been crying. It’s lame, I know, but I’m pretty sure I was crying the whole time.

“To be honest, I have no idea what she thought of that, of me. I wonder if it just made her uncomfortable? Maybe she thought I was pitying her and hated it. Either way, after a little while she left and went home.

“I think she said something about staying up all night again so she wouldn’t attack her mother in her sleep—yeah, she definitely said ‘again.’

“Can humans really go that many nights without sleep? The devil

would probably come out during the day, too, if she fell asleep—anyway, what could I do, but silently watch her go?

“Even after she was gone and I was alone, I felt agitated. I kept thinking, I want to do something for her, I want to help her. It was burning me up.

“Not that there was anything I could do, of course.

“But I figured I might as well meet up with Deishu Kaiki and see what he had to say. He called himself a ghostbuster, so he might be able to do something even if he was a swindler—soon I was calling his cell phone.

“He said: ‘It’s going to cost you.’

“To which I responded: ‘Money isn’t an issue.’

“Cool, huh?

“But I ended up not having to pay him a red cent. I got up early the next morning to catch the train to meet him—and that’s when I realized.

“That inside my plaster cast—my own left leg had transformed into a devil’s.”

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“Your leg… How can that be?” I interrupted, unable to immediately grasp what her words signified.

Numachi seemed to have expected the question, but apparently expecting it was not the same as having an answer because she responded somewhat equivocally. “Who knows? My interpretation was that my powerful desire to help her brought about a wondrous miracle, that when I embraced her the devil’s leg was transplanted from her body to mine.”

The way she put that almost seemed designed to piss me off□it made me feel like her entire story was unreliable.

“Aberrations□aren’t such slippery, equivocal things,” I said.

“That’s where you’re wrong. They’re slippery and equivocal□like me. Don’t just swallow some blinkered expert’s bullshit about every aberration having its reason. Basically we’re talking about folk beliefs here, so a layman’s intuition should be more on the mark.”

“…”

With a devil residing in parts of her body, maybe Numachi was qualified to make such a statement.

Which didn’t leave me with much I could say□but since she’d told me her story, I had the responsibility to craft some kind of response.

The responsibility?

No, not really.

That wasn’t it.

I would just speak my mind, period.

“That girl… Roka Hanadori. What happened to her?”

“I don’t know. We only met that one time.”

“One time? Hang on a sec—don’t tell me you don’t know what happened to her after the devil’s leg was ‘transplanted’ to you,” I demanded, leaning towards Numachi. “Even if you didn’t actually speak to her—didn’t you at least go scope out the situation?”

“I probably should have, but unfortunately I didn’t know her address—she’d approached me via Hard Mode, so I didn’t even know her phone number. And even if I did, a call meant talking to her, so I wouldn’t have contacted her.”

“Why? That’s so—”

Irresponsible.

Is that what I was going to say?

If so, I should have said it.

And yet, what is responsibility?

I refused that word only a moment ago, and it felt just as dishonest now.

What more could I ask of Numachi, who’d taken over the burden of a devil’s limb from a troubled girl—some stranger to her who’d been as troubled as me?

I think I can safely declare.

That not even Araragi-senpai or Hanekawa-senpai could have done the same.

You couldn’t call it self-sacrifice, and even “self-satisfaction” didn’t do the job—it was such a selfless act that parents might not suffer it for their own children.

So, how?

How could someone like Numachi?

“Basically I wanted to avoid getting too deeply involved, the same as when I was collecting unhappiness… Yeah, if you want to ascribe another reason to it, I was afraid that if we met up, if she learned that I’d taken on the weight of her ‘devil,’ she might feel burdened.”

“Burdened? You mean grateful.”

“Same thing.”

“…”

“Since the leg was transplanted to my body, hers ought to have gone back to normal in which case, there was nothing left to do. Kanbaru, you may have reevaluated me to some degree, but you’re still only seeing part of the picture. What I did probably didn’t matter anyway. I couldn’t do a damn thing about her pregnancy, about her relationship with her mother, or her relationship with the flaky boyfriend who got a high school girl pregnant in the first place.”

You could say it would have been better to let the devil kill her mother, Numachi added, once again making me wonder how to take her words.

Her arguments reminded me of Mister Oshino’s stance, always trying to settle the world into some kind of golden mean, but I also had the feeling that there was a decisive difference between him and Numachi.

The difference between expertise and a layman’s intuition.

Or maybe more a disconnect than a difference?

I can’t put my finger on it, exactly…but I feel like it has something to do with willingness.

The willingness to stick your neck out, to get involved, that Mister Oshino didn’t exhibit…

“What’s more, what I did really wasn’t altruistic. There was

something to be gained, and I knew it. By getting my hands on a devil's leg, I replaced my own ruined one. As weird as it sounds that I got my hands on a leg."

"…So then, the cast and the crutch are fake?"

"Well, yeah—I can walk normally without any pain, but I still can't expose this leg to the world. And unlike you, Kanbaru, my injury was a big enough deal to make the papers. There was no way I could suddenly say, 'It got better!' I just have to keep on pretending it's injured—like you're doing now."

"Every single thing you say has to end in a barb…and it's getting on my nerves. Do you actually hate me, Numachi?"

"You're asking me that at this late date? You actually thought I was fond of you? Or should I say fondue?"

"What does that even mean."

"It means nothing at all. Ah, but as to why I still keep this leg hidden under a cast, there's another meaning—it's useful for my 'unhappiness collecting.' It's a statistical fact that people find it easier to spill their guts to an injured person, so after all this time I couldn't give up that user-friendly experience."

"Then…" I said. "Then—nothing changed after that, you just kept collecting people's unhappiness."

"Obviously, since I'm still at it. Why, you thought I'd have a change of heart? Not a chance. But I did pick up another hobby to go along with it. In other words—collecting 'devil parts.'"

"…"

"While I ended up not having to commission Kaiki, we continued to share info, and he told me later what kind of thing this devil is—I realized that it was 'my rival.'"

"Rival?"

"Yeah. My business rival."

For the first time, I saw naked hatred in Numachi's eyes as she turned her gaze on her own left arm and leg. No, they were hers, but also not hers□

"A business rival who nullifies people's problems and in so doing renders their unhappiness irretrievable. Kaiki may be a sort of business associate, but the devil is my business rival. Which is why I decided to get rid of it□every time I caught wind of it somewhere, I visited that town and endeavored to drive it out. Or should I say… to bring it in?"

"You mean…"

"Yup. I told you at the beginning, but it's not just this arm and leg. I've got pieces of the devil all across my body. It's like that line from the Nausicaä movie, if you will□'He who becomes my husband shall see a sight worse even than this.' You don't think I'm wearing this baggy, thuggish tracksuit because I like the way it looks, do you?"

"Well…"

In other words, she was wearing it□for the same reason that Roka Hanadori wore track pants under her skirt.

Was that it?

"Haha, I'm just messing with you. I wear it because I like it. It's obviously convenient that it also hides the outline of my body, though," Numachi said, tugging down her sleeve and the cuff of her pantleg to cover her devilish limbs. "Guess I'll never be a swimsuit model." Apparently, when she contrived to split open her cast as part of her staging, she hadn't considered the consequences□the fact that she would have to get home.

A tracksuit, which can cope with such a situation, is an exceptional article of clothing indeed.

"That's the end of my story, Kanbaru. Do you understand now? That I took your left arm very much for my own personal reasons, based on my extremely personal predilections? I'll make it sound cool and

say that it was the last vestige of that long-gone moment when I wanted to be kind to someone—make no mistake, it was never, ever for your sake."

So you don't have to thank me.

That's what she told me.

Her words made me feel as though she'd seen right through me—and as though she'd schooled me.

Could it be?

Yeah, I guess.

I'd wanted to—thank Numachi.

And to come to terms with it.

But now that she pointed it out to me with her remark, that road was closed.

We were totally incompatible, she and I.

"…How much of the devil's body have you collected at this point?"

"Not even one third."

"If you collect them all—won't you become a devil yourself?"

"Maybe, but my intention is precisely to assimilate the devil into myself."

Was that even possible?

No, it wasn't about possible or impossible. Numachi wanted to do it, and she was.

Sacrificing herself—hurling out her body.

But even if she was able to, why did she feel like she needed to?

Wasn't she just being dragged along by a moment's whim?

It was the same as her unhappiness collecting.

It wasn't that she wanted to help people, even if that's what ended up happening. Nor did she want to complete the devil because she had a wish she wanted granted.

What did Numachi's life even mean.

…Nothing at all?

"According to Kaiki, things stalled in the middle of your second wish and your plan was that if you left it alone, the devil would depart because it had defaulted on its promise. But the thing about stalled is that you never know when or why it might start up again. It's a dormant volcano, not an extinct one. So I think you should count your lucky stars that I've taken over for you. Yeah, that would make me happy."

"You really think I can think that?"

"If you can, great, if not, that's also fine. You think I give a shit how you feel? I really couldn't care less. Or do you want to try and take it back? It's right here, this left arm."

"…"

"You wouldn't want to do that, now would you?"

Well then. Having said everything she had to say, she casually turned to leave my presence to leave the gymnasium.

No, "everything she had to say" is a weird way to put it when she'd told me everything I wanted to hear.

What more could I hope for?

Only, I got the feeling that it wasn't the gym she was leaving but rather the basketball court on which we'd been talking this whole time.

Maybe she had come to discharge her duty to explain everything to me, or maybe, as she put it herself, she had simply come to learn

the provenance of an item in her collection.

But I thought.

That maybe, just maybe, she came to see me at school that day—just so we could play basketball.

Hadn't she said something to that effect—that she wanted to be reunited on the court? She had made that wish, at least, come true.

Made that wish.

Come true.

Sure, her injury had been nullified, but she had that left leg, and pieces of a devil all across her body—even so, she played the sport at a level that left her with very few partners—very few with full knowledge of the situation—apart from me.

In fact, I was probably the only one.

…But had I been able to do enough for her?

What had I done for Numachi?

By listening to her story—did I ease her mind at least a little bit?

"Okay then, Kanbaru. I don't think we'll meet again, but do me a favor and take care of yourself. I mean, like… Do all those things people do, study for your exams, make new friends, find a boyfriend, find a job, get married, raise some kids, fight with them, all that human stuff."

All the things I couldn't do.

She seemed to have spoken the last bit to forestall anything I might have been about to say, and, holding her crutch with her right hand and waving with her left, which was ensconced in her tracksuit's baggy sleeve—moving at her usual leisurely pace, in no particular hurry, Roka Numachi disappeared from my sight.

The now very late members of the various sports teams that used

the gym arrived en masse only a moment after.

026

We come to hate the manga we loved as children, while later in life we find great pleasure in the novels we couldn't understand when we were young.

We begin to hate the people we once loved, and love those we once hated, we become indifferent to things we valued, and regret getting rid of things we didn't value—if the repetition of this adds up to a life, adds up to living, then it would be dishonest to say that it never seems empty.

Which is exactly why we should cherish every moment? What an overblown, insincere way to put it.

What we thought were precious memories fade away, we suddenly need the things we discarded as worthless—doesn't life become nothing but regrets if you start thinking that way?

What in the world should I have said to Numachi? Should I have put on an act and demanded that she return the arm after all? Pretended to be a resolute woman of conviction who could take on losses?

I hadn't been able to.

Nor could I thank her.

In the end I just let it be, I just let it go, I couldn't do a thing. I'd finally seen her again after searching high and low—she came to see me for crying out loud—but I still couldn't do a thing.

I listened to her story.

And I got depressed—it put me in a gloomy mood. That was it.

I was convinced that, in my own way, I'd gotten a raw deal—but my

life had been a cakewalk compared to Numachi's. Though of course such comparisons are pointless.

Even after I got home, I didn't feel like doing a damn thing, and I just flopped face down on the futon I'd left out on the floor of the disaster I called a bedroom.

I didn't even bother to take off my school uniform.

But apparently the common sense not to let your uniform get wrinkled works subconsciously and is even more basic than routine; laying face down where I'd fallen, I lazily began to undo my uniform.

Partway through, it seemed like I might never get untangled from it.

If I used both hands, I was up to the task of getting my clothes off, even in that position□if I used both hands.

"Right…that's right. Now there's nothing I can't do. With this left hand…I can take my clothes off, I can play basketball," I mumbled, hoping to just go to sleep.

And I thought□how wonderful if I've forgotten everything when I wake up, like it was all just a dream.

But that wish didn't come true.

Maybe no more of my wishes would come true, now that the devil was gone. Just as I was beginning to drift off, I heard the ringtone of my cell coming from the pocket of my discarded skirt.

"…"

When I reached out for it and took a look, Karen's number was displayed on the LCD screen.

"Ah, Miss Suruga? Sorry, were you sleeping?"

"No, it's fine… I was just lying down for a minute."

“Sorry, I’ll be brief then,” Karen said in a solemn tone. “I’m calling because I have info on that Roka Numachi person you asked me about yesterday.”

“Oh…I see.” Feeling bad that I couldn’t manage to keep the listlessness out of my voice, I said, “Sorry, when you went to all that trouble on my behalf, but I actually ended up running into her today.”

“Running into her?”

“Yeah.” I thought maybe Karen was hung up on the implication that I hadn’t wanted to see Numachi if I could avoid it□but that wasn’t the issue.

“Weird. That can’t be true.”

“Huh? Can’t be true? But I was with her today, up until□”

“You can’t have been,” Karen said. Still solemnly, as if minding my feelings. “Roka Numachi killed herself three years ago.”

027

“From what I’ve heard, she broke her leg during a middle-school basketball game—and her athletic career was finished, just like that. So she ended up leaving that school…and before she graduated from her new middle school, she slit her wrists.”

She took a box cutter in her right hand and slashed through her left wrist.

Slashed through her left wrist.

Her left.

Karen’s halting words rang in my ears for some time after she uttered them.

It was the first time I’d ever heard her sound like that…and I found my mind wandering to the irrelevant thought that such a dark tone didn’t suit her at all.

When it rains, it pours, I guess, and as if to hammer home the point.

Higasa called me right after Karen hung up—it seems that after our conversation she took it upon herself to conduct her own investigation into Roka Numachi and was bothering to call and inform me of the results.

“Bothering,” huh?

What a cynical way to put it.

When did I become the sort of person who said that about a friend who was looking out for me?

No.

I bet everyone has moments when they become that person—for instance, when you're confronted by the fact that someone you were talking to up until a little while ago has been dead for three years.

That kind of moment.

"Apparently, it wasn't just her leg—seems like things had also gotten really bad at home. The girl who told me about it said, 'Her mother might as well have killed her by her own hand'…" Even though it happened a long time ago, it was only natural to be shocked by the news that someone you crossed swords with back in middle school had died, and I could hear it in Higasa's quiet, gloomy tone too. "She always seemed to be above it all, so I never imagined… But it seems she had her reasons. Since it was after her family moved far away, I guess no one around here talked about it…"

But suicide? she asked. As if to say—I can't think of anyone less likely to commit suicide in the whole world. No word seemed more at odds with her swamp-like playing style.

But it was an unshakable fact.

Karen emailed me a newspaper article that Tsukihi had copied at the library. It was a short article from a local paper in a different region of the country, probably even shorter than the article about her breaking her leg, but it was definitely an obituary.

Presented with information from multiple sources, not to mention concrete proof, I was forced to accept the fact.

That Roka Numachi had died.

And three years ago, no less.

She'd ended her own life.

…So who was the girl with the dyed-brown hair I'd seen only a while ago? Another person with the exact same name? A lookalike who assumed her identity?

That couldn't be.

Memories of appearances tended to be vague, and her vibe had changed along with her hair color, and in fact those things could be researched—but her basketball style, that couldn't be faked.

They used to call her the Poison Swamp, for crying out loud; the Quagmire Defense was hers and hers alone.

There was no question about it. That girl was Roka Numachi.

The one I knew.

My former archrival—Roka Numachi.

"Okay," I muttered, still lying on the futon, my face buried in my pillow. "So, in other words, that Numachi was a ghost."

I accepted the possibility calmly, easily.

Not based on the facile view that if devils exist, ghosts must too, but rather because it explained a bunch of other things if it was true.

First of all, her brown hair.

She said herself that if she hung around our town with such a conspicuous look, people would be talking about it in no time. When I thought about it, there was no way I wouldn't have turned up some kind of intel on her after five whole days of searching.

And clearing everyone out of the classroom and the gym. That couldn't be explained away as happenstance—it fit together much more neatly if she'd made it happen. Even without her devil parts, she must have been that kind of supernatural presence.

And no wonder time couldn't heal the "wound"—the unhappiness—that was Numachi's injured leg if her time had come to a dead stop three years ago.

Three years ago.

Her hair color was different, but her height and style hadn't changed at all—at all, not even a tiny bit.

Also, the transplantation of devil parts would go much more smoothly if she herself were an aberration. For them to move to her body like an infection just from hugging, or touching, someone□it had to be because Numachi herself was an aberration.

There was an affinity between them.

And it was only with the perfectness of hindsight that I questioned this now, but any way you slice it, it's unrealistic for a teenage girl to roam around the country for three whole years even if she's not in school.

Japan is too full of meddlesome people.

I hear Hanekawa-senpai has been having real trouble on that score since she left Japan to travel the world, and she waited until after graduation. Seems like you have to be a middle-aged man like Mister Oshino for people to finally leave you be.

Maybe the part about an insurance payout for her leg was true, but it wouldn't be enough to support a vagabond lifestyle for three whole years□however.

If she were a ghost, any concern about expenses vanished in a puff.

A new-fangled item like a cell phone had thrown me off, but on second thought, they're ubiquitous enough nowadays to be featured in ghost stories…

Even I've got the hang of them, after all.

If we're really going to get down to it, my seniors had told me□about a ghost that haunts this town, that haunts its streets.

Haunting the entire country is a pretty huge difference…but it's just a difference of scale, and if you look at the cases themselves, they're pretty similar.

A ghost.

If the Lost Cow is an aberration that makes people lose their way, then was Numachi an aberration that gathers people's unhappiness?

An aberration that gathers unhappiness—even I could think of a few aberrations that shouldered misery for people.

A misfortune-picker.

A collector.

If her idiosyncrasy, which bordered on the pathological even if we were to mince words, could be attributed to the fact that she was an aberration—then that odd, urban-legend feel of “Lord Devil” started to make sense as well.

Urban legends.

Chinese whispers.

Campfire tales.

If it was a Tale.

But then, why was I able to see her? Going by experience, only people mired in unhappiness were capable of espying Numachi’s unearthly figure.

So why—no, hang on.

I can’t say I wasn’t mired in unhappiness, that day when I went to the burnt field where the cram school once stood—since for me the devil’s arm equaled misery.

From her perspective, I must’ve been like a turkey showing up at the kitchen door along with a baster and a carving knife—or no, not quite. She was operating in this town because she was after my piece of the “devil” in the first place.

She set up shop.

And set her trap, and waited for this turkey to waddle into it. Numachi was a hunter.

I felt like I’d been taken in, cheated, and I guess I really had fallen into a trap, but on the other hand, so what?

I went through hell last year.

One little ghost wasn't going to rattle me now.

Unbeknownst to me, an acquaintance of mine had died somewhere, that's all—someone whose funeral I probably wouldn't have attended even if I'd known about it.

We weren't friends, and we hadn't spoken much.

Feeling sad would be, in fact, dishonest.

And it's not like actually talking with her, or her apparition, left me with a good impression.

Just the opposite, it was often unpleasant—to put it bluntly, our two interactions this month made me clearly dislike her.

So I didn't have to feel sad.

It should have been fine not to.

Yet—in that case, what the hell was this feeling?

This feeling that I couldn't sit still, couldn't stand still, never mind sleep.

"…"

I forced myself to sit up and look for the cell phone I'd tossed away. Then I called a certain number—listed on the business card that Deishu Kaiki had given me.

I made the call because, while he was a swindler, he was also an expert on aberrations, and if he was acquainted with Numachi, he might have more detailed information—but it didn't go through.

He must have been toiling away as usual, mobilizing assets that lay dormant here and there in Japan's households, in order to do something about the recession.

Or maybe a high school girl who shamelessly and untowardly called

him the very next day after being told to get in touch if she was ever in trouble disgusted him.

Well, I was glad the call didn't go through.

I found myself breathing a sigh of relief.

Even if Kaiki did have more detailed information, he would only share half of it with me, in keeping with his personal principle. Plus, I felt like maybe I didn't want the details.

Yes.

I think I could be forgiven.

It wouldn't be a sin in the first place even if I just forgot about it. If I filed everything concerning Numachi under "I guess it must have been a ghost" and forgot about it□I might not be able to right away, but eventually I'd forget.

If I focused on preparing for exams□since seeing my left hand would no longer force me to recall the past.

This thing we call memory is vague.

Even seemingly unforgettable traumas recede into the past at some point□a little encounter with a ghost at the beginning of my last year of high school? That would be gone before I knew it.

"Okay."

Fixing my resolve.

I stood up and began to stretch.

Removing the underwear I was still wearing, I loosened up all the muscles in my body, at length and fully.

Then I gathered my hair into a ponytail and changed into some light running clothes.

"Time to run!"

028

I'm a bit too empty-headed for thinking, a little too dull for feeling. There's only one thing I'm much good at, and that's running.

When I run, I can leave everything else behind.

They say the legs are like a second brain. I imagine that comes from people often having a flash of insight while they're out for a stroll, but that only applies to walking. While they're running, humans don't do any thinking at all.

We may not be able to walk without looking back□but we can run without looking back.

Our minds, our worries.

We leave it all on the starting line.

That said I do usually have my course planned out beforehand when I go for my early morning jog, but that night I left even that up to chance.

Whenever I came to a corner, I turned it.

Traversing roads in my own town that I'd never been down gave me just the slightest feeling of freshness, but I left that feeling behind too.

It felt good.

It felt good to run with every ounce of strength I had.

Come to think of it, isn't running really the only chance we have to use every ounce of our strength? Most of the time, people have a limiter in place. Whatever they're doing, frankly they're not giving it everything they've got because if they don't regulate their

strength, they'll end up breaking something.

Themselves or their surroundings—something gets broken.

So they look at their watches, keep tabs on how many lives they have left before game over, and try to avoid leaning too far towards industry or sloth.

To avoid using their full strength.

In that sense, I guess people regulate themselves while they're running as well—not a person alive can complete a marathon at the speed they would run a sprint. It's always important to pace yourself, no matter what you're doing.

But that night, I even left all thoughts of pacing myself behind—and ran with every ounce of strength I had. Push it too far and your pace drops. But even then, give it everything you've got.

Run to the breaking point.

Run until you run out.

It was an ugly run, without proper form or anything. My gait and breathing were all over the place.

The appropriate expression to describe it was probably less "mad dash" than "running blind"—or more likely "running around like a chicken with its head cut off."

But I ran like that until dawn, all night long. I ran for over ten hours without a rest—I don't know how many circuits of the town I made, but I must have run over sixty miles.

I was probably in for worse than just a few sore muscles.

I could very easily have pulled the muscles in my thighs or, yes, suffered a stress fracture.

Given that I slammed down hard onto the asphalt after pushing myself to the point that my legs literally buckled under me.

But it didn't feel like a forfeit, it felt like I'd crossed some invisible finish line.

I had that feeling of elation.

Like I'd completed the race.

No one had told me to run, and I hadn't actually resolved a damn thing with Numachi, but I nevertheless felt like my slate had been wiped clean.

"My legs…are killing me."

Not just my legs, my whole body was killing me.

It was a struggle even to blink.

But it was probably nothing compared to the pain Numachi had felt—according to Higasa, she'd been dealing with a lot of other stuff too, but it was hard for me to believe that she'd chosen death for any reason other than that pain.

What besides that suffering would have driven her to die—since her emotional pain seemed to be eased to some degree by her unhappiness collecting, the foundation for which she laid even before transferring.

But maybe that was just what I wanted to believe.

At this point, I couldn't really know how much of her story was true and how much of it was a lie.

Common sense dictated that she was nothing but a hallucination, something I saw at a particularly sensitive moment in my life with my seniors gone and my environment altered—including the devil's arm.

"I guess I should have at least paid some attention to my form…" I muttered as I lifted my head slightly. It felt like lifting a ten-ton weight, and once I got it up I saw that the soles of my brand-new Reeboks had worn down to nothing. "But if I did, I doubt I would've made it."

Only after the words got out did I realize that I had no idea what I'd made, and I looked up at the sky with a wry smile on my face.

"That reminds me…Senjogahara-senpai's form…was always beautiful… So beautiful…"

Struggling even to blink was an exaggeration, but the fact is that once I closed my eyes, opening them again felt like too much of a chore.

What passed through my mind then, though I don't know why, was the sprinting figure of Hitagi Senjogahara on the track of Kiyokaze Middle back when we were there.

She'd been a celebrity.

I hadn't known, but according to Numachi, Hanekawa-senpai had been just as famous□and apparently she'd been the harder of the two to approach for everyone.

Knowing her now, I bet it was because she was too perfect. In that regard, Senjogahara-senpai could be silly, which made her more popular with her juniors□she might say that had been a performance, too, but when you get right down to it, no one isn't acting when they're interacting with others.

You can't live your life without playing a character, that's the way of the world□Numachi wasn't totally off base when she said that I play the clown.

I can't criticize Ogi on that score.

In that sense, Senjogahara-senpai's "character" was perfect□in its imperfectness. When she was running, though, she could leave even that character behind.

Beautiful.

I'd never found the sight of someone running beautiful until I saw her run□never thought that the sight of a person huffing and puffing, desperately throwing out every ounce of strength they had, could combine to such beautiful effect.

Which is why I also thought, “I don’t want to run beside that.” I didn’t want to be compared to her. Having worked so hard at running to atone for the weakness that made me turn to a devil for help, I felt like I didn’t deserve to run beside her.

It was impermissible.

So no matter how many times she invited me to challenge her in a sprint, I turned her down, again and again, for two whole years. I could have just won, pact with the devil or no□but I don’t think I even wanted to beat her.

Running, not fast, but beautifully.

No match.

“She started running again last year saying she wanted to lose weight…and God, it was beautiful. How I’d love to be able to run like that□”

The uncouth blaring of a car horn dragged my mind□adrift on a cloud of reverie and helpless nostalgia no sooner than I’d stopped running□back to reality.

True, I’d collapsed in the dead center of the road, my arms and legs splayed out like I was making snow angels. It was only dumb luck that the car didn’t run me over.

Dawn had come, but it was still so early. I had my guard down and very nearly lost my life.

When I looked, a dazzling yellow New Beetle rested a dozen feet short of where I lay.

“I’m sorry, I’ll get out of the way,” I said in response to the horn, but my voice was much too quiet to carry to the driver.

I felt like a slug.

I was too exhausted to stand up.

I considered rolling out of the way so the car could at least pass by

me, but before I could move, the driver opened the door and stepped out.

“Hey, you okay?”

Whether he thought I was a drunk sleeping it off or the victim of a traffic accident, he must have been worried. Approaching me, he crouched down and peered into my face as I lay there still unable to stand up.

“…Wait, Kanbaru?”

“Ah.” I sounded pretty stupid.

It was someone I knew.

“Araragi-senpai.”

029

“What a letdown. What a letdown. What a letdown… You, driving a car…”

“Shut up! What’s wrong with me driving a car? Do you have any idea what I had to go through to get my license?”

“But you said your bicycle was your life… You said you wanted a racing bike… Secretly, I was still feeling guilty about smashing your mountain bike, and now you’ve made a fool out of me.”

“Keep feeling guilty about that.”

“I thought it was going to be a motorbike once you graduated. You used to go on about getting a license.”

“I’ve been trying to. I just got my regular driver’s license first.”

“And I mean, a New Beetle? Not exactly the manliest car.”

“Don’t you mock the New Beetle! Say what you will about me, but don’t mock it! It’s the coolest-looking car in the world!”

“Didn’t you use to say that real men drive muscle cars?”

“Did I? Hmm, the words ‘muscle car’ really hit hard when you hear someone else say them…”

“I never wanted to see you like this… I wish you’d stayed a third-year forever…”

“Don’t worry. In the next book I’m back in high school as if nothing happened.”

“Really playing fast and loose, huh? But, good for you, buying a foreign car when you just graduated from high school. Did you take

out a loan?”

“No, my parents bought it for me for graduation.”

“What a letdown!”

He bundled me into the car like a piece of luggage and lay me down across the back seat, then offered to drive me home.

First I got taken home in a police car, now I was being taken home by Araragi-senpai; the two felt somehow like opposite ends of the spectrum.

But even with my wild imagination, I never dreamed that a precious opportunity to be swept up in my precious senpai’s arms would arrive in this fashion.

I felt a tiny bit awkward about all the ways our bodies touched as he picked me up and put me into the car, but I felt too spent even to crack a joke.

Well, I certainly felt spent.

But more than that, it was the shock of the Araragi/car combo that had taken the life out of me.

“Ahhh… I feel like I’m being abducted…”

“That’s a little disturbing.”

“I could ruin your whole life if I screamed right now…”

“Is it such a cardinal sin that I deserve to have my life ruined by a junior of mine from my high school years? Driving a car, I mean.”

“Heheh,” I laughed weakly from where I lay across the back seat.

His high school years. It was obvious, of course, but he’d entered the next phase of his life after graduating from Naoetsu High in March…

“Still, my dear senior. The whole time we’ve been texting back and

forth, you never told me you'd gotten a car. Was it because you were ashamed?"

"Hunh? Heh, maybe. The truth is, I feel pretty embarrassed that you caught me red-handed zipping around in the early morning with nowhere to go, trying to look cool in my brand-new car with my hot-off-the-presses driver's license."

You always did have a knack for turning up at the exact wrong moment, he grumbled as he eased to a stop at a red light.

His driving still had "Learner's Permit" written all over it.

"The wrong moment… I see, from your perspective it might seem that way," I said.

Looking at the back of his head as he drove.

Wow…his hair was getting really long.

I heard he started growing it out to hide the marks on his neck after he was bitten by a vampire, but now it was so long that he looked like a painter or a musician□I could cover both those options by just saying an artist.

Araragi, Artist.

That sounds so…

Just get a haircut.

"You've always had excellent timing from my perspective, though, my dear senior."

"Hunh?" He cocked his head to one side like he didn't understand what I meant but had no real interest in finding out. "Well, I guess it's not actually such a bad moment. As in, you're the first person besides my little sisters to ride in this car. Except for Shinobu, of course."

"What about Senjogahara-senpai?"

“She doesn’t trust my driving.”

“Sounds like something she’d say…”

“‘Anybody would sooner ride on you while you crawl around on all fours than in a car you’re driving.’ Anybody would sooner? Where do I fit in?”

“Haha. Her acid tongue has gone NC-17 since she graduated from high school.”

“‘Regulations? Huh? What’re those?’ she says.”

“Guess she’s not done turning over that new leaf…”

“‘I! Am! In college now! I’ll be nineteen soon! So those regulations don’t apply to me anymore, top or bottom!’”

“Your imitation is a little too close for comfort…but didn’t they get rid of any regulations having to do with age?”

“They sure did. To put a positive spin on it, the government is putting an attraction to little girls on equal footing with an attraction to cougars. In a sense, you might say they’ve recognized lolicon as a basic human right.”

“That spin is so positive it’s scary.”

“I’m not sure about Senjogahara’s use of ‘top,’ though… And she also said, ‘Publishers ought to have the guts to turn this situation around and profit from it. In particular, beat the government to it and set up independent civil review boards that will issue lenient rulings, claiming at the same time some of the big bucks the nation and the PTA are throwing around.’”

“Sounds like a little too much entrepreneurial spirit…”

“‘Moreover, the review committee can expect a little something extra from the creators to grease the wheels.’”

“That’s low!”

“Yup. If possible, I don’t want that kind of person in my passenger seat.”

“You’d give Hanekawa-senpai a ride, though, wouldn’t you?”

“My driving technique isn’t up to snuff yet. I couldn’t display it to someone who drives military vehicles around minefields for NGOs in conflict zones.”

“…”

Is that what she’s doing with herself?

That’s some hardcore self-discovery.

“Did something happen?” asked my dear senior□gently bringing the conversation around to me. If anything triggered it, it might have been the light turning red, but I’m pretty sure that wasn’t it□I found myself thinking that even if he replaced his bicycle with a car, even if he grew out his hair or nails, he was still very much Koyomi Araragi.

Whether he changes or not.

Whether he matures or not, he’s the same old Araragi-senpai.

“Things aren’t working out for me,” I told him pathetically, griping when I hadn’t seen him in so long. “Things just aren’t going my way. I feel really unstable.”

“You being unstable is nothing new.”

“Yeah… I think I’m just really lonely by myself, with you and the others gone.”

“There’s Ogi-chan.”

“Chan?”

Finding the diminutive odd (was he the kind of guy who ever applied it to boys?), I shook my head.

When he put it that way, I had Higasa.

I've actually got plenty of friends, and I enjoy talking with my juniors from the basketball team.

And yet.

The disappearance of my stalwart seniors has poked a gaping hole in my heart.

"You know, Senjogahara's sad too. She misses you."

"And you?"

"Of course I miss you. I miss you a lot. You're the only one who can follow me to the banter underground."

"…Oh."

That remark made me happy.

Even if he was just being diplomatic□no, he never was the type to be diplomatic.

Therefore.

Therefore, I.

"What's not going your way? It's not like you to run until you collapse."

"Not like me… I've completely lost track of what is or isn't like me."

"Lost track?"

"Uh huh. What the hell does it mean for something to be like me? What do you think it means for something to be like you, for instance?"

"That's a good question□I dunno. I was always just struggling to live up to the role of your dear senior. In that sense, maybe it was you who decided what was or wasn't like me."

“I decided?”

“In the end, maybe we play whatever character people we want to like us will like—though there’s got to be more to it. There are things we lose, that we lose track of, when we put on such a performance.”

“Things we lose… Right. I feel like I’ve already lost all kinds of things.”

I was thinking of the arm underneath me as I lay there. It was still wrapped up, so he probably had no idea what it looked like beneath the bandage.

This past week really brought home how that left arm had become very much a part of what was “like me”—but also how it had been something I needed to cut loose sooner or later.

If that arm was the punishment I had to bear for my sins, then it had been necessary for me to complete my sentence.

I’d been terribly wrong in thinking that checking the morning paper and the TV news and tying up my arm before I went to bed for the rest of my life would serve as my atonement.

Atonement was something more…much more…

“I wonder…if you’ll be done someday too,” I muttered.

“Hm? With what?”

“Uh, nothing…”

Sprawled across the back seat, I let out a sigh.

There was such a gap between the burdens he and I bore that it didn’t even bear comparison. Nor was it something I should ask about lightly.

So I asked something else instead.

“Hey, Araragi-senpai, how were you able to make yourself do so

much for everyone, even to the point of sacrificing yourself?”

“Like I ever did. You’re talking about Hanekawa.”

“It was…different with her, I think. What she sacrificed wasn’t her own life□but you denied yourself, and kept on denying yourself, to arrive at where you are now. How were you able to do that?”

I asked him. Maybe I was criticizing him more than asking him.

The fact is.

I did want to criticize him.

Because I knew how hard, how unbearable it had been for Senjogahara-senpai to watch him be that way□and keep silent.

And.

It had been hard□unbearable, for me too.

Especially□at the beginning of second semester when the ruins of the cram school burned to the ground along with all our memories, and during that other case right before graduation…

It had been so bad that I’d wanted to die in his place.

“I don’t think it was just your immortal body. In fact, your immortal body is your greatest self-denial and a sort of tomb.”

“…”

“Tell me. What makes you…go so far?”

I felt sure□that the answer would provide some insight into Numachi and her collections too.

What was this about wanting to accomplish something□

So badly that you’d deny yourself.

So badly that you’d die for it.

“That’s a tough one… The truth is, I’ve never really thought about it. That sounds disappointing…but hmm, let’s see.”

He made a show of thinking about it.

As far as I could tell, he really hadn’t thought about it—maybe he never even needed to.

But I wanted to know.

The reason.

Or rather, the purpose.

I wanted him to consider the principle that governed his actions.

“…Back when I was in elementary school,” he began.

“Huh?”

“During class, I’d think about this kind of thing: If a spaceman suddenly appeared in the classroom and was going to do something horrible to everyone, what should I do?”

“…”

“The me in my imagination would take down the spaceman without a second thought—I would thoroughly beat his ass into the ground with a finishing move like the muscle-buster or something.”

I was the hero, he said.

His awfully serious tone contrasted sharply with what he was actually saying—I couldn’t quite tell if he was being serious or if it was all a joke.

“I think every boy has daydreams like that to some extent. And you, Kanbaru, as a girl? What were you thinking about during class in elementary school?”

“What was I thinking? Well…”

Hmmm.

I don't think I ever indulged in fantasies like those…or at least that's what I'd like to think, but upon reflection, the first time I asked a devil to grant my wish was during elementary school… In that sense, I had no right to laugh at his story.

It was too similar to my own.

"I guess I'd be lying if I said I never had such thoughts," I replied vaguely in the end.

"I see. Well—after I graduated from elementary school, I learned that everybody had been thinking the same kinds of things, and I felt embarrassed about how 'not special' I was. At the same time I was also kind of relieved—it was reassuring more than anything."

"Reassuring?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Because there were so many students in that classroom who wanted to protect their classmates—when I realized that, it made me think the world was still doing okay. If that many people wanted to be heroes—world peace had to be just around the corner."

"…"

"I was quickly disabused of that notion, though—it was a pretty weak basis for such a revelation—but if there's something besides Hanekawa that contributed to making me who I am today, it was probably the feeling I had back then," Araragi-senpai said, laughing.

I still couldn't tell if he meant it—in fact, with a punch line like that, it seemed like he must have been joking.

And yet.

I was pretty sure he'd—given the most sincere answer he could to my question.

Right…

For the sake of others, for everyone's sake—as fishy as that sounded,

it wasn't entirely a lie.

Self-sacrifice.

Denying yourself.

It actually isn't impossible to understand—we just don't want to.

And me doing so would be odd, I seriously feel.

There's not a damn thing I want to accomplish so badly that I'd die for it.

A woman who has something she wants to accomplish so badly, she'd die for it—who even in death keeps on gathering.

Keeps collecting—unhappiness, and a devil.

"Listen, Araragi-senpai. You have a friend who's a ghost, right?"

"The word 'friend' doesn't begin to express our relationship. I sometimes wonder if she and I were the same person in a past life."

"Yikes, that's creepy."

"Anyway, what of it?"

"What do you think is the difference between people who turn into ghosts and people who don't? Not all people become ghosts, right? If they did it'd be trouble, the whole town would be overflowing with them—in which case, what separates them?"

Does it have to do with the presence or absence of regret?

Do they become ghosts because they've left something undone, or because they have a grudge or something? But when you put it that way, surely no one dies without at least some regrets.

Everyone leaves behind loved ones, not to mention unfinished business, when they die.

"That's a good question, I've never thought about it…but I wonder. Maybe everyone actually does become a ghost. Maybe our town is

overflowing with ghosts, and it's just that most people can't see them."

"So with any given ghost, there are people who can see it and people who can't—then it's not that some people become ghosts and some don't, it's that people can see some ghosts and not others."

"But wouldn't life kind of lose its meaning if everybody could just become a ghost after they died?"

"True. The part after you die definitely seems more fun," I agreed.

"I bet ghosts and the afterlife and stuff were originally invented by people who couldn't accept someone else 'dying'… I mean, I don't feel like I could become a ghost even if I died."

"Then, do you think ghosts ought to pass on?"

"Probably, but if my friend passes on, I might feel sad. Or no, not sad, I just won't like it—"

Which might be why she's sticking around this town without passing on.

As he said this, he took a curve—and I thought, does that friend get to ride in the passenger seat of his car?

Well, I guess that picture reeks of a crime.

"I want to do something about this situation," I said, gazing at the sky through the window and sensing that we were getting close to my house. "But leaving it alone, I somehow know, would be best."

"Best? How come?" my senior asked simply. Since I hadn't explained the circumstances to him at all, that was perfectly natural.

"Because no one is suffering."

"…"

"No matter how miserable the situation, if the person seems fine,

you shouldn't interfere, right? What's the point of going out of your way to tell them, 'you're unhappy'? If they're enjoying their unhappiness, then there's nothing anyone can do about it. And as it stands, many people are even being helped. If a lot of people are being saved by a situation that I want to do something about, and not a single person is suffering—it can't possibly be okay for me to stick my nose in for my own selfish reasons?"

Hearing all this, Araragi-senpai probably felt clueless—I doubted he'd heard anything from Karen, and I hadn't explained a single thing, only let out this torrent of angst, so how could he dispense any advice?

Indeed, his blunt response was, "Search me."

All the same, just talking about it made me feel a lot better.

I think. Dammit.

Did that mean Numachi was right? Would time eventually take care of this feeling as well?

Yeah, probably.

Aimless and forlorn sorrow, too—would someday be a memory.

Which you would then be able to forget.

In which case—

"But you know, Kanbaru." To my surprise, after taking in my hopelessly garbled story—and after his initial blunt response, Araragi-senpai kept going. "It's not true that no one's suffering."

"Huh?"

"At least one person, you, are suffering. And that's plenty of reason for you to act. The fact that you yourself are suffering makes this case huge, as far as you're concerned."

And if you're suffering, it pains me, okay, and Senjogahara too, okay? he reminded teasingly.

More so than warm, his words felt natural, like I'd come into contact with the temperature of a human being for the first time in a long time.

But, right.

That's right.

He was the kind of guy who said stuff like this all the time.

"Not to sound like Oshino□but the only one who can save you, if you're in trouble, might be you."

"Still… This feeling I have, it'll just go away at some point. Time even takes care of troubles that settle in your heart."

"What the hell? Those words, if anything, don't sound like yours. Did someone say something like that to you? Don't think too much, or Think more, that crap?"

"Yeah. Different people have said a lot of different things to me."

Numachi.

Kaiki.

And my mother□they all told me whatever they felt like telling me.

"Forget them."

And just like that, Araragi-senpai gave all that whatever the boot.

"That someone isn't you. When did you get so smart and start worrying your head about different people's needs?"

Just like I've done everything my way□you've got to do it your way from now on, he said, still facing forward.

Still driving, of course.

If he looked back at me, that might be a problem.

"Just as I was the me who wanted to live up to your expectations, if

you want to conform to someone else's view, then fine, but if you don't find it persuasive, then you've got to fight. Like I have, against Senjogahara, against Hanekawa, against Oshino, even against you and your expectations of me."

"I see…"

I saw that I ought to have kept it simple.

Wavering at length until I was hemmed in that definitely wasn't in character.

Not like me, at all.

At my senior's words, I sat up in the back seat, though we couldn't have been driving for more than ten minutes, certainly not long enough to relieve my exhaustion.

"I'm persuaded by your view," I said. "So I'm going to fight."

"Mm-hmm. Good luck, then… Anything I can do to help?"

"Nope."

I was pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to see Numachi.

But that wasn't it what had to be done next, only I could do.

Yes.

I had to graduate as well.

From him, and from Senjogahara-senpai I had to become a new me, who could get by on her own.

In fact, I should have been showing such a me to my esteemed senior that day.

In that sense, I hadn't been on my lonesome at all.

It was from here on out that I would be alone.

I needed to be just me.

“Ah.” Told that he was useless, Araragi-senpai sounded pleased for some reason. “Glad to hear it.”

“Yup. Though if you really want to do something to help, you can come and clean my room.”

“Put that first on the list of things you need to graduate from.”

030

Araragi-senpai drove me right up to the gate of my house and was about to drive off without even getting out of his New Beetle, but I hadn't actually recovered to the point of being able to walk on my own—or at least I pretended that was true—so he helped me into the house.

I was hoping to be carried in those arms one more time, wishfully thinking that Senjogahara-senpai would be totally fine with it, but of course he didn't go that far and just gave me his shoulder to lean on.

It was its own kind of intimate contact, and that was good enough for me.

But, bad luck for him, we bumped into my grandma who was cleaning the front hall just at that moment—they'd met a number of times before, and she had taken quite a shine to him, so before he knew what hit him, he was invited in for breakfast.

I told her I'd been running all night long and the last thing I wanted to do was eat, so I was going to take the day off from school and sleep all day. I started to head back to my room.

When my grandpa called out to me.

Apparently, a package had come for me early that morning.

"A package?"

Yes, a package, my grandfather nodded.

He said it had been left outside the gate and that he'd put it in my room for me.

"…"

Left outside the gate? What the hell?

That seemed pretty suspicious.

Was it a bomb or something?

Thinking that my grandparents, old-fashioned as they were, tended to be too lax about these things, this time I walked on my own towards my room, or maybe crawled would be a better way to put it.

The thing that had been left in my room was a box wrapped in bright white paper. Because my grandpa said that a package had been delivered, I somehow imagined a cardboard box, but when I touched it, I discovered that what was beneath the wrapping paper was actually wood.

When I tore off the wrapping paper, I saw that it was a paulownia box.

It seemed somehow familiar or perhaps strange but no, the paulownia box I knew all too well was smaller than this one.

Attached to the lid was a piece of paper with a note:

This is something Gaen asked me to hold onto, so you don't need to pay me for it. If you want to use it, use it. If you want to throw it away, throw it away.

The handwriting was infuriatingly good, and it wasn't signed.

But it was pretty easy to guess who it was from, given the unprompted talk of money, especially since the sender referred to my mother as Gaen.

In which case the paulownia box had to be his response to the phone call I'd made yesterday.

I held my breath and opened the lid.

Sure enough, the thing crammed into it was the mummified head of a devil.

031

I did end up taking the day off from school.

And the next day, and the next.

I had no choice.

That's how horribly sore my muscles were after an entire night of running—it was like I had wrecked my entire body.

I had plenty of time to reflect on what came of acting without considering the consequences—but at the same time, I'd gotten to see my senior again thanks to that lack of consideration, so let's call it a win.

"All's well that ends well" are profound words indeed.

That being said, I may not have needed my third day of rest, but, but, I wanted to be back in tip-top shape when I returned to school so I decided to be extra cautious.

I had options, of course.

To put it in Lord Devil terms, I had the Easy, Normal, and Hard options—Easy would naturally be to take the mysterious mummified object that had been delivered to me and to say, Ewww gross, and smash it to bits. Then live out the rest of my life in calm, composed contentment.

That would be simplest.

If this were a novel, it wouldn't be a bad ending for my coming-of-age story. The last page could close with the masterful line, And so the girl grew into a woman.

Normal would be, yes—handing over the mysterious mummified

object to the junk collector who desired it so much. Then we could make believe we were friends and act out a proper farewell accompanied by a catchy line. Not a bad ending either. Sorry, thanks, farewell. That would wrap up the story nice and neat, and it might leave a surprisingly pleasant aftertaste as well.

But I chose Hard as a matter of course.

There never really was another option.

That's how I live my life.

When I play video games, I always choose the highest difficulty level right off the bat.

Which is why I chose to draw out a devil using a devil as bait, and as if that wasn't enough, to do my best to exorcise that devil once it graced my presence as the bonkers way to end this tale.

I doubt very much that it was what the mystery man who sent me the mummified object was hoping I would do he, that swindler, probably wanted me to pick Easy Mode.

But I wasn't going to be the me he wanted me to be.

Just as I couldn't do what my mother, not that I know what she expected by bequeathing that mummified hand, wanted me to do.

I'm an athlete.

So I know very well the significance of living up to people's expectations but if, in spite of that knowledge, I stumbled onto the significance of betraying those expectations, I might as well go all the way with it.

If high school is all about making memories I should at least make satisfying ones.

Even if I'm going to forget them someday.

"…I didn't expect to see you again, Kanbaru."

After school, Friday.

Although it was after school on a weekday, and not exam week or anything, no one was practicing in the gym—I was the only person there, just like on Monday.

“This is like suddenly remembering a long-forgotten memory just as you’re drifting off to sleep.”

While a girl with dyed-brown hair, wearing a tracksuit and holding a crutch, two of her four limbs encased in plaster casts, stood on the court—I couldn’t count her as a “person.”

Since she wasn’t human anymore.

“I figured I’d find you here, Numachi… Kaiki told you, I assume.”

She scowled at this, a rarity for her, and said, “That swindler. He fucking had it all along. And the head, no less, the most important part of all—unbelievable. His policy might be to share only half of what he knows, but he fully intended to deceive me all along. Dammit, was his endgame to snatch all the parts I had collected out from under me? Or was he going to try and turn a profit on the head?”

“More likely the latter, after it reached its peak value—then again, maybe a little bit of both. He could probably maximize his profit by selling an assembled devil to some scholar.”

Something like that.

Either way, I’d found it kind of puzzling that Kaiki would continue his dealings with Numachi for so many years. She may have thought of him as a business associate, but the relationship couldn’t have been terribly important to someone like him, who had such an extensive operation—but this explained everything.

Mixing up a ghost in his quest for profit, though? That was just too greedy.

It did make me feel kind of yucky that I was the only person he was kind to, but…yeah.

He'd hoodwink just about anyone if it was on my behalf—so he'd said.

Then just this once, I'd get on board with that ickiness.

I'd exploit every resource at my disposal.

…Nah, that hackneyed phrase just isn't for me. After all, if I actually felt that way, it would have been most expedient to rely on my dear senior.

"So Kanbaru. That mummified head, the devil's head—do you think I can have it?" asked Numachi. From her perspective, it must have seemed like a compromise, like she was cutting me some slack—she was nothing if not a pacifist.

Even at this juncture, she wanted to select a method where we'd both come out unscathed.

I don't know if that constituted Easy or Normal or what, but it was a possibility. Just as it was plenty possible to avoid a clash, to kick the can down the line, and to leave it to the future to resolve the issue.

She just didn't think like me, that's all.

She was right.

She had to be.

But I was also right.

I had to be.

Neither of us was wrong—but when right collided with right, only one could win out.

"Not a chance," I said. "I don't want to be cold to my old archrival after she went to all the trouble of coming here to meet me—but I can't give this to you."

"Why not?"

“I wonder.” Half of me was genuinely troubled by Numachi’s question. “If I have to give a reason, then how about this: I’m worried that if you finish collecting all the parts of the devil, you’ll turn into the real thing yourself.”

“Play with a devil and you’ll become a devil, is that it? I’m not a weakling, unlike the rest of you.”

“Who knows? I mean, this is the head□the brain, of all things… But no, you won’t, you’re probably right. You’re strong. You don’t need to ask a devil to grant your wishes. If you have a wish, you’ll grant it yourself. So if I have to give a reason□” I tried to weigh my words, but they were too heavy. “I just can’t stand to look at you.”

“Can’t stand to look? That’s fine, just don’t look then.”

She seemed suspicious, and I shook my head.

Sure, totally.

But I can’t help it.

Because I can see you□whether I like it or not.

Whether it’s because we had both possessed pieces of the devil or because I was prey to the sort of unhappiness that made someone turn to Lord Devil for advice, or because we were archrivals back in the day, I can’t say.

But I can see you.

Since I can see you□I can’t stand to look at you.

“I think every event in the world comes down to that feeling,” I said. “I can’t stand to look, I can’t leave it alone, that kind of simple motivation is at the root. Even justice and evil must start out as not being able to stand it□we’re forced to look at things we don’t want to see, and we can’t bear it.”

“…”

“Let’s settle it with a match, Numachi.” I took the paulownia box

out of my bag and flourished it at her as I spoke. “This is the showdown. On the court of this gym, one on one. If you win, I’ll give you this piece of our cultural heritage. And if you lose, you’ll give up collecting unhappiness and devil parts forever.”

“…What the hell? That’s ridiculous,” she said as if it really was ridiculous, and out of the question. As if she wouldn’t even consider it. “There’s nothing in it for me, is there?”

“Sure there is. If you decide to take me up on my offer, at the very least I won’t smash this mummified head to smithereens with a hammer.”

“A hammer… You must be joking.”

“I’m not. As a collector, I don’t see how you can pass this up but even more than that, if you really were a basketball player, how can you refuse?”

“I warn you…” Numachi narrowed her eyes in a glare that announced she was doing just that. “If that mummified head is on the table, this won’t be fun and games like it was last time. It’ll be an actual match.”

“Yeah? I was sure you were playing your hardest last time.”

“Actual means actually using this devil’s arm and leg Kanbaru, do you really think that a regular human like you has any chance of beating me?”

“If I didn’t…I wouldn’t play, would I.”

My reply didn’t sound as confident as I would have liked, but I’d mustered as much bravado as I could.

Araragi-senpai would definitely have gone for a bigger bluff.

“So? What’ll it be?”

“I’ll do it,” answered Numachi. “Of course I’ll do it but there’s something I want to ask you first. There’s clearly something in it for me, you’ve proved your point on that score. But what about you,

Kanbaru? What the hell do you get out of this little contest?"

"I already told you. If I win, you'll give up both of your collections. I can't do much about the unhappiness side of things, but I'll take responsibility for disposing of the devil parts you've collected so far."

"Sure, that's to my detriment—but it isn't really to your benefit, is it?"

"That's where you're wrong," I said, laying the paulownia box on the floor. "Your loss is my gain."

"Ah… Okay." Finally grasping the situation, Numachi looked bashful. "You hate me."

"Exactly," I nodded. I, too, must have smiled shyly. "Though with a personality like yours, you can't possibly have thought otherwise."

"But Kanbaru… With this arm and leg, I can take that box from you regardless of the outcome of our game, no? I can just knock you down and take the devil's head from you by force, no? Aren't you—afraid of that?"

"Nope—I'm not afraid." This time it wasn't bravado, I was just telling it like it is. "You may be a thief, Numachi, but I don't think robbery is your thing. You're not that kind of girl."

"…"

"At least, that's what I want to think."

The you I think is most like you.

As I said this, I started changing my clothes right there on the court.

I didn't want to take the time to go to the locker room—and it's not like anyone besides Numachi was watching anyway.

It wasn't gym clothes that were in my bag—but the commemorative uniform I'd worn in the nationals my freshman year.

It wasn't a superstitious thing.

I turned my room upside down to find it, out of the extremely realistic expectation that much like using a familiar ball, wearing it would elicit the best possible performance from Basketball Player Suruga Kanbaru.

I also wore the high-tops from my playing days.

Talk about an actual match—that's how I saw it too.

It couldn't be more actual.

"You're so trusting," Numachi observed. "Leaving the box on the floor like that, getting naked in front of me."

"I've got a bit of an exhibitionist streak."

"Then—it must have been hellish having to keep your arm hidden for a whole year."

"Yup," I readily agreed. I'm not much good at hiding things.

"All right, let's get this showdown on the road. Once I get my hands on that devil's head, the rest of the parts will just fall into my lap. As you put it yourself, it's literally the brains of the operation—"

And so saying, Numachi busted open her casts just as she'd done the other day, revealing what was underneath, the truth of her devil's body, for all the world to see. Not stopping there, she took off the jacket of her tracksuit so that she was sporting nothing but a Heattech shirt on top.

Ah ha.

Underneath that single layer of cloth—was a hellish sight.

There were pieces of the devil all over her body.

She somehow reminded me of a waxwork, just as her name implied—a poorly made one, in poor taste.

And one more layer down, under the skin—some of her organs almost certainly belonged to the devil as well.

She said she still had less than a third of them, but it looked like over half her body was already composed of devil parts.

Wanting more when she was already in that state went beyond the spirit of a collector, it could only be called the act of an obsessive monomaniac.

Or maybe in the beginning Numachi had been collecting pieces of the devil of her own accord—but now the devil was calling the shots?

Literally become its arms and legs.

Play with a devil and you'll become a devil.

Numachi, herself, said that she wasn't such a weakling—but who isn't one?

If someone told you it would be granted.

Who the hell wouldn't make a wish?

Anyone who wouldn't—couldn't possibly be human. They'd have to be a different order of being entirely.

A god, or a devil.

"Let's keep it short and sweet, though, not like last time," Numachi said. "A long, drawn-out game gives me too much of an advantage—in which case, I won't feel like I actually 'won.'"

"What, you don't like having too much of an advantage?"

"It's not that. I just don't want you to call the result into question afterwards."

"Gotcha…then let's do it this way. Sudden death, with each of us playing to our respective strengths."

“Sudden death?”

“One on one, one play, with me on offense and you on defense. If I can score a basket, I win, and if you can stop me, you win—like a fifty-meter dash in my old sprinting days, or a penalty kick when you played soccer.”

“That…” Numachi seemed wary and gave it some thought, but after due consideration she said, “still gives me too much of an advantage, doesn’t it?”

Just what you’d expect from the Poison Swamp.

Staggering self-confidence.

However—I had just as much of my own.

“Not at all. I wouldn’t have suggested it if I didn’t think it was to my advantage.”

“Yeah? Well, if we both think we’ve got the edge, then I don’t see a problem. The sooner we start, the sooner we’re done. I’d feel guilty if we kept holding up practice for all the active players.”

“Listen, Numachi.”

“What now?”

“Do you have qualms about passing on?” I asked as she moved to the free-throw line.

I couldn’t let our match begin without putting that question to her first—but.

But she responded with a “Huh?” and said, “Is that supposed to be some kind of metaphor since I’m turning into a devil? If it is, it’s a pretty crappy one. Shouldn’t you say ‘call up’ or something when you’re talking about a devil? ‘Pass on’ makes it sound like I’m a ghost. Anyway, Kanbaru, can you lend me some shoes? I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m not sure I can beat you barefoot. They don’t have to be high tops, regular sneakers are fine.”

“…Sure. Someone’s spares are probably in the locker room, help yourself.”

I can’t even picture the expression I must have had on my face as I said that.

I turned my back to her as fast as I could, so I doubt Numachi saw it, whatever it was—though I don’t think I could hide the fact that my back, my shoulders, my entire body was shaking.

“Okay. This way, right?”

Numachi left the free-throw line where she’d been standing and headed towards the locker room—the moment she was out of sight, my knees buckled under me and I sank to the floor.

Oh, my God.

The possibility hadn’t even crossed my mind.

Roka Numachi—didn’t realize she was dead.

She didn’t know that she was a ghost.

She wasn’t aware that she was an aberration that amassed misfortunes.

She’d forgotten—her own suicide.

“Is that even…possible?”

Well, it was.

When I thought about it, there were lots of old stories about ghosts who didn’t realize that they were dead.

I was desensitized after everything that happened last year—I’d come to accept aberrations as a perfectly normal part of everyday life.

Which they weren’t.

Not for most people.

So it was no surprise if a lot of them had a hard time accepting the ludicrous proposition that they'd become residents of the afterlife.

By nature of the situation, there was no way to obtain statistical data but they had to be in the majority.

Nobody.

Wanted to accept that they were dead, or to believe it in the first place.

However mentally tough Numachi was, however above it all, however much she liked to sound enlightened it didn't necessarily mean she could accept her own death.

She hadn't been lying to me.

She really did believe that she was roaming around the country on the money from her insurance settlement, collecting unhappiness it allowed her to make sense of her experiences.

Which is why she didn't pass on or anything.

She was collecting unhappiness, gathering up the parts of a devil, like nothing had changed.

"I see… Got it… That's what I'm about to do."

This was beyond Hard Mode.

I was about to tell my old archrival that she was already dead if this were Fist of the North Star I might be able to deliver the line in just the right way and make it sound cool, but here in the real world it would just be cruel.

Still, I'd do it.

And inflict that cruelty.

It was too late to turn back now I'd already set my course.

If, as a result, I was able to liberate this wandering ghost, trapped in

a cycle of unproductive behavior, this ghost with her two pathological collections—then in a certain sense, it might almost be an act of mercy.

But I couldn't let that make me feel better about it.

That would be unacceptable.

A benevolent end in no way justifies the means—Numachi's activities happened to help people too, and this was no different.

Benevolence and justice need to be willed, it mustn't ever be any other way—I wasn't trying to save her.

Simply put, I could very well have ended up like her—so yeah.

Since I couldn't stand it.

I wanted to put her down. No more, no less.

"As her former archrival, I want to put an end to her."

If I didn't, someone else would.

Time would take care of it, just as it did the problems that high schoolers brought to Numachi. If I left it alone, Mister Oshino—or maybe Kaiki—at any rate, someone would take care of her.

But I was going to be the one to do it.

I wanted to.

I won't say it felt like my duty, like I had to do it—no, when we really get down to it, it's probably much simpler than that.

I just wanted to—properly beat the woman.

I wanted to beat Numachi.

I wanted to be sure—that she wasn't me.

I had to make sure.

“Sorry that took so long. Ready to get started?”

Numachi came back from the locker room wearing a different basketball shoe on each foot□one of the shoes appeared to belong to a boy. She had to find something that fit her devil’s foot, so it was hardly surprising.

It wasn’t just her borrowed basketball shoes, though.

She was unbalanced across the board.

Unnatural.

Unstable.

And so, while I felt like I could find all sorts of reasons why I couldn’t leave her be□more would present themselves the more I thought about it□I only needed one.

Yes.

I wanted a showdown with her.

Despite the fact that I’m not much of a fighter, that’s what I wanted.

That and nothing more.

To settle, once and for all, the winner, the loser.

Either way, I didn’t have the right words to convince Numachi to pass on□I had no message for her.

No words to send her on her way.

All I could do was let my game speak for me.

I gently bounced the ball as I walked at a deliberate pace towards Numachi, who stood on the free-throw line once again.

Every step felt like it took me further and further past the point of no return, but I couldn’t turn back now.

I crouched down in the ready position facing Numachi and held the

ball in front of my chest.

“You know, it’s funny, Kanbaru. Back in middle school, people always said we were archrivals. But this is the first time we’ve played a real game against each other.”

“Is it? I feel like I remember playing against each other a million times.”

“We had scrimmages and joint practices, but we never faced off in a regular season game. I played against Higasa’s team□any number of times in fact… But fate is really something, isn’t it. Even playing in the same tournaments, our teams never faced off.”

“I can’t believe it… I somehow felt like we’d spent all of middle school competing… We must have sensed something in each other, and not just because our playing styles were diametrically opposed.”

“But once you graduated, you forgot all about me, didn’t you? You only had eyes for Senjogahara.”

“I definitely forgot. All about you,” I said firmly.

As harshly as I could.

Yet I added firmly, so as to stamp out my massive reservations, to do away with any last hesitation:

“But then I remembered.”

“…”

“I’ll forget all about today as well, and then remember it again somewhere down the line□hey, Numachi. What do you think about the saying, ‘It’s better to regret doing something than to regret not doing it’?”

“That’s just the whining of a whipped dog,” she declared. “Regretting not doing something is obviously better.”

“Right. I think so too. Only some irresponsible third party who

hasn't tasted the remorse of 'having gone and done it' would suggest otherwise."

And yet, I said, my eyes locked on Numachi's.

"And yet—what's best is to do something and not regret it."

Tup.

And with those words—I sprang into action.

To be precise, I tried to spring into action.

Because Numachi was all over me in an instant, covering me with more than enough pressure to keep me hemmed in—I'd barely twitched, but she recognized instantly that play had begun.

I was facing Numachi, no mistake.

At the same time, I felt keenly what a joke our one-on-one the other day had been—it had been child's play, nothing but an extension of our old scrimmages and joint practices.

This was the big game.

No, it was more than that.

She was giving her devilish power free rein—this was Roka Numachi's real-deal Quagmire Defense.

A diabolical defense.

"Ugk…"

I hadn't been taking her lightly, by any means, but this was so overwhelming that all I could do was groan.

Yes.

Numachi wasn't going to let me get away with anything.

I became keenly aware that the nickname Can't-Jump Swamp only captured half the truth—it wasn't just about jumping, she wasn't

going to let me do anything but groan.

She wasn't going to let me dribble, or shoot.

She was covering me closer than a faceguard, stuck to me so tightly that she reminded me of nothing so much as a sticker.

A particularly sticky sticker stuck onto my bare skin—that might take a piece of me with it, if I could peel it off at all.

Numachi didn't say a word.

Which was only natural. Nothing to say in the middle of a game—she was playing for keeps, too. With all the tenacity of someone who's come back from the dead.

Everything she was, everything she had was riding on that defense, while I had nothing to lose, just an itch to scratch—no, scratch that!

I did have something to lose.

If I didn't beat her, I'd lose—lose sight of what it truly meant to be me.

I refuse—to let you or anyone else manipulate my life.

Besides my momentary groan, we didn't say a word to each other, but nevertheless we were deep in conversation.

When all is said and done, I guess Numachi and I were both athletes to the core—God, how I do love basketball.

To be able to engage so deeply—with literally anyone.

With someone I can't stand, with someone I can't understand, even with someone who's dead.

"Fhh…"

Exhaling the oxygen from my body, I took two steps away from the basket—however immobilized I may have been, it was only in terms of forward motion. No one can mount a perfect 360-degree defense

all by themselves, and in retreating I gave Numachi the slip.

Though it's probably more accurate to say that she let it slide—and simply didn't dog me.

At that distance, a basket was no sure thing. I wasn't a complete novice when it came to three-pointers, but my chances of sinking the shot were drastically reduced.

And I wasn't about to win on some desperate gamble.

That would be like winning a coin toss—who the hell could be proud of that?!

This was a showdown!

With my old archrival—no!

My current archrival!

And her eyes were asking me—what have you got up your sleeve?

Having taken two steps with the ball, I couldn't move any further. It's the first rule that anyone learns in basketball—traveling.

My opponent was an aberration who'd been roving the highways and byways of the entire nation, but traveling would be an unbearable way for our contest to be decided.

In other words, if I wanted to settle things with Numachi once and for all, I had no choice but to break through her defense and drive to the basket.

Yet I'd experienced firsthand the fearsome difficulty level of doing so. To put it plainly, it wasn't humanly possible to get past Numachi with the ball in your hands. That said, I had no intention of praying to God—much less imploring the Devil—for help.

Forget relying on them.

I have someone else I can rely on right here.

Numachi.

You're strong.

I've never been exposed to such a fierce defense, even at the nationals when I was a freshman.

Sure, you're borrowing the power of a devil right now□but even without that, you'd probably be among the greatest players in Japan.

The despair you must have felt when you broke your leg□your despair at the enormity of your loss. But I bet it wasn't the injury itself that you were so broken up about.

You'd probably deny it if I came out and said it.

Either way, it's difficult to penetrate that Quagmire Defense□with my power alone, that is.

Never forget.

You can't play basketball by yourself.

"Fhh□"

Though there wasn't actually a timekeeper, just before the five-second rule was up, I threw the ball.

A Hail Mary buzzer-beater?

No. I wouldn't stoop to that.

It was a pass.

A chest pass.

It was impossible to get past the Poison Swamp with the ball in your hands. But it was another story entirely if someone else was holding it□

But who? Who would catch my pass?

Who did I pass the ball to—isn't it obvious? In a one-on-one matchup it's one against one, so there's only one other person on the court to whom I could pass the ball.

Yup.

Roka Numachi.

"—?!"

Be you human or devil, your arms react instinctively when a ball comes hurtling towards you.

You catch the damn thing.

I was off at rocket speed before I even knew for sure that Numachi had hold of the ball—I was counting on her to catch my pass.

Sometimes your archrival is more dependable than any teammate.

We were closer than teammates.

That's what it means to be archrivals.

I disliked her.

I hated her.

But I knew what she was capable of.

I blew past Numachi with every ounce of speed I had—and naturally, I stripped the ball from her hands as I did so.

A steal.

And because this time she was the one holding the ball, Numachi's movements were dull—I flew past her and took the ball like it was a synchronized dance routine we had worked out.

And then I planted my foot and took off—the ball, which I had only dribbled once, firmly gripped in both hands.

I leapt toward the rim, with only one thing in mind.

I didn't want to win a contest based on probability.

I wanted a decisive victory.

So forget probability.

I would properly propel the ball through the hoop—with my own two hands!

"Wha-?!"

But in that moment, a cry of consternation escaped my lips—because something occurred that was completely outside any pattern of events that I'd envisioned.

A hand interposed itself between me and the hoop.

Numachi's hand.

Even as I'd slipped past her, she'd pivoted—and instantly regrouped to get back to defending.

And she blocked me.

But—it was unthinkable! She was the Can't-Jump Swamp!

Her sluggish movements were her ace in the hole—sounds good, right? But that same lack of agility was also her Achilles heel. It was why Numachi, who excelled so thoroughly at defense, was a mediocre offensive player—she lacked the requisite split-second judgment.

That aspect of her character was also the source, I think, of her patience to put off a problem until it was neutralized—which is why I figured she'd be flustered longer than the average person by my scheme to pass the ball to my opponent.

And I had been right, or should have been, but she rallied instantaneously—how was that even possible?

Was it because she had so much of the devil in her body?

Did that arm and leg enable a drive that was otherwise unfeasible?

That had to be it.

Or maybe not.

Because the hand that Numachi slipped in between the ball and the hoop wasn't her left hand, it was her right□

"I don't want□"

She can't have actually said it out loud. There was no way she had the leeway to speak.

So I couldn't have heard it.

I must have felt it.

"□to lose!"

"Neither do I!"

At that point it wasn't a question of skill or strategy.

I shoved the ball through the hoop by brute force□wrapping in Numachi's right hand.

Our intertwined bodies fell to the court in a tangled heap at just about the same moment the ball hit the floor.

I very nearly landed right on top of Numachi, but at the last instant I was able to thrust out my arms like the poles of a tent and avoid disaster.

This put us in a position that was the exact inverse of when she'd lain atop me□as though this time I'd been the one to push her over.

Perhaps we were even closer to each other now. Yes, at least our faces were.

Listening to the sound of the ball bouncing on the surface of the court, Numachi and I stared into each other's eyes, our faces separated by only a couple of inches.

Stared into each other's eyes.

"…keh."

"Heh."

"Haha□hahaha."

"Heheh□hey, hey."

Numachi lay there chuckling□I was laughing too□and neither of us moved a muscle.

"Didn't I win the second I had the ball?"

"You didn't have control of it, so it was still in play."

"I had control of it."

"Are you sure? If you did, you wouldn't have come after me… I was surprised you could."

"You said dunking felt like cheating."

"This was do-or-die, I absolutely had to win."

"Even my own teammates never really passed the ball to me. To get a pass from my opponent…"

"…"

"It feels good, doesn't it? I guess I'd forgotten. No, I never figured it out in the first place. Basketball really is a team sport□"

I stopped playing. Without ever understanding that□Numachi said and closed her eyes.

I thought maybe she wanted me to kiss her, but well, that couldn't be it. If we stayed in that position forever though, it was going to get awkward, so I heaved myself up on my arms and then stood.

I hopped to make sure I wasn't injured from the fall. I'd forced myself into an unnatural position to get the ball into the hoop, so a

little bruising was probably inevitable.

“Ahhh.”

Lying there with her legs and arms splayed wide, Numachi sighed deeply.

She looked like she was at peace.

I’m one to talk—it’s an almost embarrassingly fitting metaphor to use here—but she looked like someone who’d been freed from demonic possession.

Wow.

She was—this cute?

I kind of wished I’d kissed her.

“So this is losing. Somehow it feels like the first time I’ve been able to lose properly.”

“Properly?”

“I never understood my life in terms of what the heck I lost to—damn. Forget about exam prep, Kanbaru, and get your ass back on the court. With your talent, you could make it anywhere, not just in some high school club. What are you standing around for? No, in your case—I guess you’re lying down on the job. Life doesn’t have any timeouts, you know.”

“If I’ve gotta hear that from you, I’m doomed,” I said, looking up at the gym ceiling.

Not that there was anything I wanted to look at up there; it was just a simple stretch to make sure my neck didn’t hurt.

“But it doesn’t piss me off so much if I think of it as valuable advice from Lord Devil herself.” I looked back over at Numachi. “Should I come up with some cool parting line too? Hey—”

There was no one there to look at.

No one, but not nothing.

In the spot where Numachi had lain face-up, desiccated body parts that resembled the mummified pieces of a monkey were arrayed like specimens on a dissection table.

Neatly, in a humanoid shape.

“Tsk. For such a slowpoke, she always beats such a hasty retreat□”

I was neither saddened nor surprised.

I simply accepted it□there it was, then.

In the end, did she disappear without ever realizing she was dead□without ever knowing what she was?

I never understood my life.

Those words were suffused with the truth of her experience.

Never understanding her life in terms of what the heck she lost to□but at the very end, she was finally able to lose properly.

I’d helped her lose.

“For my part, though…I don’t really feel like I won properly.”

With Numachi gone, hordes of club members were about to start pouring in (late) to the gym.

I expeditiously packed into a vinyl bag I’d brought the mummy displayed on the court. I’m sure a collector like Numachi would object to the rough handling, but I wasn’t about to pay any mind to some connoisseur’s fastidious bellyaching.

“I guess you aspired to be a team player…but speaking as an expert team player, I aspired to play like you, taking on five opponents all by yourself.”

To be like you: to act freely, regardless of anyone’s opinion, undaunted by their stares.

Everyone longs for an existence different from their own.

To become something other than what they are, to possess what they don't have.

Different appearance, different character, different environment.

The righteous are jealous of villains, and villains are jealous of the righteous.

That's humanity for you—we'll even covet unhappiness, if it belongs to someone else.

Yes.

Now that Numachi was gone.

Having gathered up the collection she'd assembled, I finally realized.

Right. I hadn't hated her.

"I—envied her."

With that recognition, I felt like I'd graduated.

From something.

032

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Or maybe I should call it the finish line instead.

That night, I had this dream.

“The motivation for justice is almost always its envy of evil. And the motivation for evil is an antipathy for justice. Old people are always lecturing the young because they’re jealous of youth, while children’s disobedience springs first and foremost from envying adults’ stock of experience. Underlings can’t wait to supplant their strutting superiors, while those superiors long for their days as an underling with no responsibilities. The poor dream of being wealthy, while the wealthy covet the freedom of the poor. Single people long to be married, but once they have a family they mourn their old life as a swinging bachelor. Wasn’t this story basically like that for you, Suruga?”

At this point I was thoroughly used to my mother’s high-handed manner of speaking, but something was different about that night’s dream. This time, I answered back.

“No, mother, it was not,” I said.

Recalling as I said it, Oh yeah, this is the stiff, formal tone I used when I spoke to her.

It wasn’t that I felt distant from her.

It’s just that I felt like I needed to adopt that attitude in dealing with her; that’s the kind of person she was□there was respect, but there was also fear.

Either way, it was no way to talk to your mother.

But I kept it up anyway.

It was too late to change.

“This was a story about having fun with an old acquaintance I happened to run into□”

My mother appeared to snort derisively at my words, and from the fact that she said nothing more, maybe she took them as nothing but bluster.

Well, so be it.

The Elektra Complex aside, mothers and daughters had to confront, and to face off against, each other□because I knew that occasion would present itself someday, there was no need to eschew conflict in these dreams and hallucinations.

Kaiki seemed to have some emotional attachment to my mother, but that didn’t mean I had to feel the same way□he said it himself: just because someone likes someone doesn’t mean I have to like them too.

And the idea that I should be grateful to her for leaving me with that insane object is messed up to begin with□though that’s probably not quite so black and white as it appears, either.

The time would surely come when I would be grateful to my mother.

The day would arrive when I could understand how she felt.

But that day was not today, and it wasn’t tomorrow.

Until I pulled ahead of my mother, or at the very least caught up with her□I would never understand how she felt.

“If you can’t be medicine, be poison. Otherwise you’re nothing but water□though that girl, who wasn’t medicine or poison, and was water, might have been muddy water. What about you, Suruga, what are you?”

“A flash flood? And water you?”

“Groan.”

Not even a smile.

Well, it was a terrible joke.

And that is why I’m not interesting.

“’Kay, mother. See you.”

“Yeah, see you.”

And then I woke up.

Or rather, I was woken up.

And it wasn’t by my grandma or grandpa; I was woken up by my dear senior of all people.

“Huh? Wha? Why the hell are you at my bedside, Araragi-senpai?! I-It can’t be…”

“Don’t worry, that’s not it.”

Apparently he’d come to drop in on me, and my grandma had given him an all-access pass to my bedroom. You can go right on in. Go ahead and wake her up.

Such lax security.

“What do you know about security, sleeping buck naked like that… You know, seeing you naked doesn’t do a thing for me anymore.”

“That line deserves a lawsuit.”

“Even seeing my little sisters naked is more arousing.”

“A double trial.”

“I’ve got two sisters so make it a triple.”

“When do you see your sisters totally naked?”

“When I strip off their clothes, for starters.”

“How about we skip the trial and get straight to the sentence?”

“Guess I’d better hurry up and get tidying, then.”

And just like that he rousted me from bed.

It was Saturday, and by rights I should have been at school, but I’d slept until noon—so I couldn’t really complain about being woken up like that.

But my showdown with Numachi had, in a way, been more intense than my all-night run, so I probably needed the sleep.

My muscles were sore, yes… But there was psychic damage as well, which was no surprise seeing as I had just been through a paranormal experience.

I’d like to rest just a little bit longer, if you don’t mind—I thought, but I couldn’t give my senior the cold shoulder when he’d come all this way to clean my room, and for the first time in a while.

The appointment for today’s cleanup had been made during our previous encounter—and to tell the truth, I’d planned to ask him for advice if I hadn’t resolved things with Numachi by this point.

His visit was my insurance.

Maybe that was a sign of weakness on my part, but I’m not sure I would’ve had the courage to act without that policy in place.

“Damn, look at this mess! I’ve only been gone a little while.”

“That’s how I roll.”

“Why so proud… I’ll never catch up at this rate, even if I clean the place twice a month.”

“No, no, no. This is the last time I’m going to impose on your

kindness.”

“Oh yeah?”

I got dressed, and together we started cleaning up my room—in the past, when he was nice enough to do this for me, I just waited in the hall so as not to get in the way, but this time he let me help him.

It was my room, after all, so helping was the least I could do.

As we worked, I told him about everything that had happened since the start of the new term—now I could tell him.

When all was said and done, and when I said everything that had been done, the whole thing didn’t seem like such a big deal—still, I wanted to tell him.

“Wow. You really stuck to your guns. And—sounds like it was rough.”

Those were his thoughts on the matter.

“No…it wasn’t so bad.”

“Sure it was. You’re always too hard on yourself, for better or for worse. If it was me, I would’ve thrown in the towel.”

“But it was you I was trying to emulate…”

“Haven’t I told you? You’re really overestimating me—you’re a way more amazing person than I am.”

He wasn’t just blowing smoke up my ass, and he wasn’t saying it just to make me feel better. He must have meant it.

But I still think that if it were him, the tale would have developed in a neater way.

“Oh, Araragi-senpai. I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“Mm?”

“It’s about the mummified devil parts I collected from Numachi. I’m having a pretty hard time disposing of them. Do you think you could take care of them for me?”

“I don’t see why not, but what should I do?”

“I was thinking you could give them to Shinobu as a snack.”

“Ah…gotcha. That’ll certainly take care of the problem once and for all. But, uh, don’t they have some kind of cultural value?”

“The second I got my hands on them, they ran out of luck.”

They were fresh out of their infernal luck.

I could always sell them to Kaiki, but if I did, who knows what nefarious uses he might put them to.

It felt right somehow for them to provide nutrition to a little girl.

A fitting end for a devil.

“Other people’s misery is like sweet nectar, huh? Doesn’t make much sense to me. Listening to people’s pity-bragging would just bore the shit out of me.”

“I bet it would. There can’t be many people unhappier than you, my dear senior.”

“Dumbass. I’m the happiest person in the world.”

“Sure you are. But what would you do? If you could wish for anything, what would you wish for?”

“Tough call. I’ve got too many wishes, I don’t think I’d be able to decide.”

“Hm…I guess that’s true for most people.”

That’s the thing about wishes.

There are too many to choose from.

And you shouldn't choose.

You really shouldn't make that kind of pick.

Because the second you choose your wish stops being a wish and becomes a strong will.

The kind of strong will that's apt to wound you, and others.

You've got to be conscious of that.

You can't just lightly, childishly pick a wish like you're blowing out the candles on a birthday cake or sitting on Santa's lap.

Even three wishes is narrowing it down too much.

You should be choosing, not from among wishes neatly lined up on a shelf but something else entirely.

Like who you are.

Or how you live your life.

Or what path you're going to take that kind of thing.

I want it to be that kind of thing.

"Only one, huh? I think I know what it would be. If only Karen weren't my sister…"

"Anything but that."

"No, you're right, if she wasn't my sister anymore that would defeat the whole purpose. Maybe if she was my stepsister… No, but the stepsister thing would be like exploiting a legal loophole, I'd feel guilty. I want her to be my real sister, all open and aboveboard. In which case, yeah, I'd want the law to be changed instead"

"Is Karen…going to be okay?"

He took my casual question seriously and sank into thought, which made me seriously worried.

“What are you worried about? Karen’s going to be fine,” he assured me. “I’m going to take good care of her, for the rest of our lives.”

“…”

I was speechless.

Where was life going to take this guy?

I was more unsettled than worried.

But as long as they’re mere wishes and nothing more, then no restrictions.

Never mind three, have however many you want.

“In any case,” my senior Araragi switched gears he acted as though all of it had been idle chatter, which I don’t think was true, but in any event, he switched gears. “It doesn’t matter whether wishes come true or not. Wishes are something you grant yourself, which means they may not actually come true, but I think the act of wishing is already worthwhile in and of itself.”

“Wishing in and of itself?”

“Yeah. Whether or not you can get what you wished for, knowing what it’d be is a good thing to learn about yourself. What do you desire, what do you want to be, what kind of person are you if you don’t learn that about yourself, you’ll lose your way in a snap.”

“I wonder if that’s why that person left me the Monkey’s Paw…”

“That person? Oh, you mean your mother? Yeah… Actually, who knows. Children will never understand what the hell goes on in their parents’ heads.”

He sounded oddly emotional about the subject.

Maybe he was thinking about the car his parents bought for him because he’d always said he didn’t get along with them.

I didn’t know what the deal was, and I wasn’t going to ask.

Hmm.

I see.

I always thought that person had never treated me like a child□but actually.

She may have treated me like a daughter all along.

As her dear and only daughter.

…Well, that's what you call wishful thinking.

It took hours to remove all the strata of useless junk from my room, and when that was out of the way, my plans for the day were only half complete.

After enjoying a little tea with my grandparents, I spread out some newspaper on the floor of my now sparklingly clean room, put a towel around my shoulders, and turned my back towards my senior Araragi, who stood there with scissors at the ready.

"You sure this is what you want?"

"Yup. Go wild."

I decided on this second half of the plan only the night before, so he hadn't known□opening and closing the scissors with a snip-snip he said, "What a waste. This hairstyle really suits you."

"Yeah, I like it too, but it's no good for playing sports."

"You know, this is the third time I've cut a girl's hair."

"What a life…"

"So I'm actually pretty used to it. But don't you have a salon you go to?"

"I do," I said, "but I wanted you to cut it."

"How come?"

“Because this is a watershed moment.”

Huh, he nodded.

I don’t think he had any idea what I meant, and I truly appreciated that he didn’t ask.

“Oh. Araragi-senpai, do you mind driving me somewhere?”

“Sure, where?”

“I was thinking of visiting Numachi’s grave.”

“Ah… In that case, we can have Tsukihi find out where it is for you.”

“Yes… Part of me wants to carry on Numachi’s legacy and find the remaining pieces of the devil, but I don’t think I’ll actually do it.”

“That’s for the best. You can’t take the whole burden on yourself. With devils, it’s safer to have them scattered in pieces anyway□okay, ready? Here I go.”

He announced his intention to begin□and misted my hair with a spray bottle.

“…”

Roka Numachi.

She’d compared her own life not to a tale but to an afterword□I guess she thought of it like the reminiscences of a former thespian looking back over her career, in which case her collections (both unhappiness and devil) were like the hobbies of a retiree.

I don’t believe for a second that I saved her.

In no way is it true that I rescued her.

Sure, maybe I liberated her from an unproductive pastime, but who in the world could deny her that wasted time?

I’m certainly not her parents, so who am I to deny someone her

right to waste her time?

So in the end I feel like I butted in—and what an ungrateful wretch that makes me, if Numachi was the one who returned my left arm to me.

But what else could I have done?

And now, what else can I do but pray?

Pray that our showdown—our first showdown ever, was fun for her.

Like putting faith in God, like importuning the Devil.

All I can do is pray.

Even if her end as a human was wretched, her end as an aberration wasn't—I can only pray.

I like to think that what was keeping her was the regret that she'd never seriously pitted herself against me, Suruga Kanbaru.

She didn't want to play with a devil.

She wanted to play with me.

Thus those three years of hers.

It would tie things up nicely if I close with some pretty line like, From now on I'll play for the both of us. But I'd never be so shameless.

I'm not that kind of person.

Still, I want to learn from her tenacity. Because the tenacity to cling to your pursuits even beyond the grave is something I lack.

Which reminds me, I haven't checked the newspaper yet today. Oh well, one day's probably okay. Or two days, or three.

And maybe I can sleep soundly?

Blaming yourself isn't the same as remorse.

Nor is beating yourself up.

That kind of self-flagellation isn't punishment.

Having immersed yourself in an unproductive pastime, constantly looking back over your shoulder, reviewing the past□you need to turn around and face up to the rest of your life at some point.

Meetings and partings.

Seat assignments and class assignments.

By learning, and graduating, and then doing it all again, I'll become an adult.

Obtaining something, losing something, experiencing, forgetting□that's how I'll shape my future self.

I will almost definitely forget this feeling.

That's why I have to live out my current, and not past or future, self.

No.

I want to live it out.

The blades Araragi-senpai held began their work on my hair.

Shhhk.

It pained me, like it was my flesh and not my hair he was cutting, but that pain was a rare gift.

The experience I couldn't have wished for.

"Kanbaru. I'm sure all kinds of people will think all kinds of things about what you did when they find out. There'll be people who think you did the right thing, and people who think you did the wrong thing. But that's not what this is about. Don't pay any mind to what anybody else might say. Because you didn't do the right thing, and you didn't do the wrong thing," my dear senior told me,

evening out the tips of my hair. I couldn't think of another time when he'd spoken so kindly to me. "What you did was your youth."

Afterword

There probably isn't a single person on Earth whose self-image matches up perfectly with how other people see them. I suppose it's like the feeling most people get when they listen to a recording of their own voice: "That's not how I sound." Though in that case, the feeling of "that's not how I sound" is not so much a disconnect as a rejection; nobody hears a recording of their own voice and thinks, "Whoa, that's what my voice sounds like? Awesome!" The comparison is apt in that regard as well: I have a feeling there aren't many people who, when they discover how other people see them (their image), think, "Whoa, that's how people think of me? Awesome!" Obviously this is true when someone is being maligned, but even when they receive unexpectedly good reviews, they just end up thinking, "No way, you must have the wrong person," or something… They say no one dislikes praise, but that isn't really true, is it? All too often a compliment makes someone feel bad, and it's not because they didn't want a pat on the back, they just wanted one for something else. But even if our view of ourselves doesn't totally jibe with the way other people see us, that doesn't mean that one or the other is correct. If a false assumption goes unchallenged, does that make it true? If a misapprehension goes unchallenged, does it become reality? There are various schools of thought□that there is only one truth, or that there are as many truths as there are people□but the fact is that there's no such thing as truth to begin with. There are just as many misapprehensions as there are people. That's my feeling, anyway. The logical extension of that is that there is no such thing as the self, no such thing as being like oneself, but maybe that's going too far? My apologies if I've invited any misunderstanding.

As it happens, NISIOISIN is quite fond of the phrase, "At the risk of being misunderstood," and he uses it just as much in everyday conversation as he does in his work. In that sense, you could call this a novel that happily risks being misunderstood. Or no, that's

not true. Better to call it a novel that very much fears being misunderstood. People have already got the wrong idea simply because it's narrated by Suruga Kanbaru, and frankly I'm shaking in my boots. Then again, maybe it's impossible for people not to fear being misunderstood, even if all this truth doesn't exist and there are as many misapprehensions as there are people stuff isn't just fancy rhetoric. With that in mind, then, this has been HANAMONOGATARI "Suruga Devil," a novel written Lucifercent as a hobby. Which is what, 666 percent? Search me.

Miss Kanbaru's first cover* has been eloquently rendered for us by VOFAN. There was talk of putting Miss Numachi on the cover, but she's scary. She also hates being in the spotlight, apparently. Though someday I'd really like to try my hand at writing "Roka God"□is the kind of remark that got me into this mess in the first place. It's not that I want to be misunderstood! That's about the size of things.

* Editor's Note: BAKEMONOGATARI was originally published in two halves in Japan, and Kanbaru did not appear on the cover of either volume.

NISIOISIN

HANAMONOGATARI

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